

THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy and
Science Fiction

1954

Every story
in this issue **NEW**



35¢

APRIL



WILLIAM TENN FRITZ LEIBER

C. M. KORNBLUTH WILLIAM MORRISON

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Coming

in our May issue (*on the stands in early April*) is the first installment of *LummoX*, the newest serial by Robert A. Heinlein! (*Time out for gleeful chortling.*) For your advance information, *LummoX* is a totally indestructible, wholly charming being from Outer Space (*from a planet 900 light years away, to be exact*); and the chronicle of its (*or—sex is not so simple among the stars—his or her*) life and confusing times upon this earth gives you Heinlein at his superb best. It's a novel that weaves together in a final, brilliant pattern the complexities generated by such attractive and curious people as *LummoX*'s sorely beset young master, a chronically enraged police chief of a small American town, a bland representative of those interplanetary go-betweens, the Rargyllians, and—most unforgettable of them all—the indomitable, though dyspeptic, Mr. Henry Gladstone *Wilkes*, Permanent Under Secretary of the Department of Spatial Affairs. This is that rare occasion when an editor can say to all of his readers: *You'll love this one!*

Aiding and abetting *LummoX* in entertaining you will be the usual strong list of fantasy and science fiction by your favorite writers—and frankly, *we're too excited* at the moment about the acquisition of the first Heinlein serial in any science fiction magazine in two and a half years to know just which stories will accompany it. The one thing we're sure of is that we'll extend special greetings to baseball's new season with Lysander Kemp's mad fantasy about an elderly rookie, *The Airborne Baserunner*.

BE SURE YOU GET *all* INSTALLMENTS OF *LummoX*

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 6, No. 4

APRIL

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Science-Fiction Handbook

BY L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

From Manhattan to Mars, here's the inside story of fiction's newest, most fantastic upsurge.

A top S-F writer tells you the tricks of his trade in the first full-length book about who writes science fiction, publishes it and reads it. "The history of science fiction and the account of science-fiction writers and fans will be fascinating to anybody interested in this branch of literature," says S-F expert Basil Davenport.

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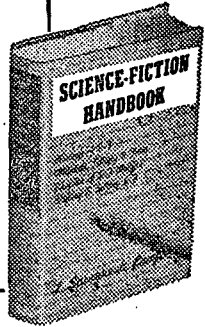
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Although he is also famed for such grim ironies as Generations of Noah (in THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES: 1952) and as the editor of a unique anthology, CHILDREN OF WONDER, primarily William Tenn is renowned as the merry-andrew of science-fantasy. We'll swear he's at his chortlesome best in this dolorous episode in the life of that sterling young realtor, Mr. Sydney Blake, whose woes all began on the thirteenth floor of the ancient McGowan Building.

The Tenants

by WILLIAM TENN

WHEN MISS KERSTENBERG, his secretary, informed Sydney Blake over the interoffice communicator that two gentlemen had just entered and expressed a desire to rent space in the building, Blake's "Well, show them in, Esther, show them right in," was bland enough to have loosened the cap on a jar of vaseline. It had been only two days since Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate, had appointed him resident agent in the McGowan Building and the prospect of unloading an office or two in Old Unrentable this early in his assignment was mightily pleasing.

Once, however, he had seen the tenants-to-be, he felt much less certain. About practically everything.

They were both exactly alike in every respect but one: size. The first was tall, very, *very* tall — close to seven feet, Blake estimated as he rose to welcome them. The man was bent in two places: forwards at the hips and backwards at the shoulders, giving the impression of being hinged instead of jointed. Behind him rolled a tiny button of a man, a midget's midget, but except for that the tall man's twin. They both wore starched white shirts and black hats, black coats, black ties, black suits, black socks and shoes of such incredible blackness as almost to drown the light waves that blundered into them.

They took seats and smiled at Blake — in unison.

"Uh, Miss Kerstenberg," he said to his secretary who still stood in the doorway.

"Yes, Mr. Blake?" she asked briskly.

"Uh, nothing, Miss Kerstenberg. Nothing at all." Regretfully, he watched

her shut the door and heard her swivel chair squeak as she went back to work in the outer office. It was distinctly unfortunate that, not being telepathic, she had been unable to receive his urgent thought message to stay and lend some useful moral support.

Oh, well. You couldn't expect Dun & Bradstreet's best to be renting offices in the McGowan.

He sat down and offered them cigarettes from his brand-new humidor. They declined.

"We would like," the tall man said in a voice composed of many heavy breaths, "to rent a floor in your building."

"The thirteenth floor," said the tiny man in exactly the same voice.

Sydney Blake lit a cigarette and drew on it carefully. A whole floor! You certainly couldn't judge by appearances.

"I'm sorry," he told them. "You can't have the thirteenth floor. But —"

"Why not?" the tall man breathed. He looked angry.

"Chiefly because there isn't any thirteenth floor. Many buildings don't have one. Since tenants consider them unlucky, we call the floor above the twelfth the fourteenth. If you gentlemen will look at our directory you will see that there are no offices listed beginning with the number 13. However, if you're interested in that much space, I believe we can accommodate you on the six —"

"It seems to me," the tall man said very mournfully, "that if someone wants to rent a *particular* floor, the least a renting agent could do is let him have it."

"The very least," the tiny man agreed. "Especially since no complicated mathematical questions are being asked in the first place."

Blake held on to his temper with difficulty and let out a friendly chuckle instead. "I would be very happy to rent the thirteenth floor to you — if we had one. But I can't very well rent something to you that doesn't exist, now can I?" He held his hands out, palms up, and gave them another we-are-three-intelligent-gentlemen-who-are-quite-close-in-spirit chuckle. "The twelfth and fourteenth floors both have very little unoccupied space, I am happy to say. But I'm certain that another part of the McGowan building will do you very nicely." Abruptly he remembered that protocol had almost been violated. "My name," he told them, touching the desk plate lightly with a manicured forefinger, "is Sydney Blake. And who, might I —"

"Tohu and Bohu," the tall man said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Tohu, I said, and Bohu. I'm Tohu." He pointed at his minuscule twin. "He's Bohu. Or, as a matter of occasional fact, vice versa."

Sydney Blake considered that until some ash broke off his cigaret and spattered grayly on his well-pressed pants. Foreigners. He should have known from their olive skins and slight, unfamiliar accents. Not that it made any difference in the McGowan. Or in any building managed by Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate. But he couldn't help wondering where in the world people had such names and such disparate sizes.

"Very well, Mr. Tohu. And — er, Mr. Bohu. Now, the problem as I see it —"

"There really isn't any problem," the tall man told him, slowly, emphatically, reasonably, "except for the fuss you keep kicking up, young man. You have a building with floors from one to twenty-four. We want to rent the thirteenth, which is apparently vacant. Now if you were as businesslike as you should be and rented this floor to us without further argument —"

"Or logical hairsplitting," the tiny man inserted.

"— why then, we would be happy, your employers would be happy, and you *should* be happy. It's really a very simple transaction and one which a man in your position should be able to manage with ease."

"How the hell can I —" Blake began yelling, before he remembered Professor Scoggins in Advanced Realty Seminar II ("Remember, gentlemen, a lost temper means a lost tenant. If the retailer's customer is always right, the realtor's client is never wrong. Somehow, somewhere, you must find a cure for their little commercial illnesses, no matter how imaginary. The realtor must take his professional place beside the doctor, the dentist and the pharmacist and make his motto, like theirs, *unselfish service, always available, forever dependable.*") Blake bent his head to get a renewed grip on professional responsibility before going on.

"Look here," he said at last, with a smile he desperately hoped was winning. "I'll put it in the terms that you just did. You, for reasons best known to yourself, want to rent a thirteenth floor. This building, for reasons best known to its architect — who, I am certain, was a foolish, eccentric man whom none of *us* would respect *at all* — this building has no thirteenth floor. Therefore, I can't rent it to you. Now, superficially, I'll admit, this might seem like a difficulty, it might seem as if you can't get exactly what you want here in the McGowan building. But what happens if we examine the situation carefully? First of all, we find that there are several other truly *magnificent* floors —"

He broke off as he realized he was alone. His visitors had risen in the same incredibly rapid movement and gone out the door.

"Most unfortunate," he heard the tall man say as they walked through the outer office. "The location would have been perfect. So far from the center of things."

"Not to mention," the tiny man added, "the building's appearance. So very unrepresentable. Too bad."

He raced after them, catching up in the corridor that opened into the lobby. Two things brought him to a dead stop.

One was the strong feeling that it was beneath a newly appointed resident agent's dignity to haul prospective customers back into an office which they had just quit so abruptly. After all, this was no cut-rate clothing shop — it was the McGowan Building.

The other was the sudden realization that the tall man was alone. There was no sign of the tiny man. Except — possibly — for the substantial bulge in the right-hand pocket of the tall man's overcoat. . . .

"A pair of cranks," he told himself as he swung around and walked back to the office. "Not legitimate clients at all."

He insisted on Miss Kerstenberg listening to the entire story, despite Professor Scoggins' stern injunctions against over-fraternization with the minor clerical help. She cluck-clucked and tsk-tsked and stared earnestly at him through her thick glasses.

"Cranks, wouldn't you say, Miss Kerstenberg?" he asked her when he'd finished. "Hardly legitimate clients, eh?"

"I wouldn't know, Mr. Blake," she replied, inflexibly unassuming. She rolled a sheet of letterhead stationery into her typewriter. "Do you want the Hopkinson mailing to go out this afternoon?"

"What? Oh, I guess so. I mean, of course. By all means this afternoon, Miss Kerstenberg. And I want to see it for a double check before you mail it."

He strode into his own office and huddled behind the desk. The whole business had upset him very much. His first big rental possibility. And that little man — Bohu was his name? — and that bulging pocket —

Not until quite late in the afternoon was he able to concentrate on his work. And that's when he got the phone call.

"Blake?" the voice crackled. "This is Gladstone Jimm."

"Yes, Mr. Jimm." Blake sat up stiffly in his swivel chair. Gladstone was the oldest of the Sons.

"Blake, what's this about your refusing to rent space?"

"My *what*? I beg your pardon, Mr. Jimm, but I —"

"Blake, two gentlemen just walked into the home office. Their names are Tooley and Booley. They tell me they tried unsuccessfully to rent the thirteenth floor of the McGowan Building from you. They tell me that you admitted the space was vacant, but that you consistently refused to let them have it. What's this all about, Blake? Why do you think the firm appointed you resident agent, Blake, to turn away prospective tenants?"

I might as well let you know that none of us up here in the home office like this one little bit, Blake."

"I'd have been very happy to rent the thirteenth floor to them," Blake wailed. "Only trouble, sir, you see, there's —"

"What trouble are you referring to, Blake? Spit it out, man, spit it out."

"There *is* no thirteenth floor, Mr. Jimm."

"What?"

"The McGowan Building is one of those buildings that has no thirteenth floor." Laboriously, carefully, he went through the whole thing again. He even drew an outline picture of the building on his desk pad as he spoke.

"Hum," said Gladstone Jimm when he'd finished. "Well, I'll say this, Blake. The explanation, at least, is in your favor." And hung up.

Blake found himself quivering. "Cranks," he muttered fiercely. "Definitely cranks. Definitely not legitimate tenants."

When he arrived at his office door early next morning, he found Mr. Tohu and Mr. Bohu waiting for him. The tall man held out a key.

"Under the terms of our lease, Mr. Blake, a key to our main office must be in the possession of the resident agent for the building. We just had our locksmith make up this copy. I trust it is satisfactory?"

Sydney Blake leaned against the wall, waiting for his bones to reacquire marrow. "Lease?" he whispered. "Did the home office give you a lease?"

"Yes," said the tall man. "Without much trouble, we were able to achieve a what-do-you-call-it."

"A meeting of minds," the tiny man supplied from the region of his companion's knees. "A feast of reason. A flow of soul. There are no sticklers for numerical subtleties in your home office, young man."

"May I see the lease?" Blake managed to get out.

The tall man reached into his right-hand overcoat pocket and brought up a familiar folded piece of paper.

It was the regulation lease. For the thirteenth floor in the McGowan building. But there was one small difference.

Gladstone Jimm had inserted a rider: . . . *the landlord is renting a floor that both the tenant and landlord know do not exist, but the title to which has an intrinsic value to the tenant; which value is equal to the rent he will pay.* . . .

Blake sighed with relief. "That's different. Why didn't you tell me that all you wanted was the title to the floor? I was under the impression that you intended to occupy the premises."

"We do intend to occupy the premises." The tall man pocketed the lease. "We've paid a month's rent in advance for them."

"And," added the tiny man, "a month's security."

"And," finished the tall man, "an extra month's rent as fee to the agent. We most certainly do intend to occupy the premises."

"But how," Blake giggled a little hysterically, "are you going to occupy premises that aren't even —"

"Good morning, young man," they said in unison and moved toward the elevators.

He watched them enter one.

"Thirteen, please," they told the elevator operator. The elevator door closed. Miss Kerstenberg walked past him and into the office, chirping a dutiful "Good morning, Mr. Blake." Blake barely nodded at her. He kept his eyes on the elevator door. After a while it opened and the fat little operator lounged out and began a conversation with the starter.

Blake couldn't help himself. He ran to the elevator. He stared inside. It was empty.

"Listen," he said, grabbing the fat little operator by one sleeve of his dingy uniform. "Those two men you just took up, what floor did they get off at?"

"The one they wanted. Thirteen. Why?"

"There isn't any thirteenth floor. No thirteenth floor at all!"

The fat little elevator operator shrugged. "Look, Mr. Blake, I do my job. Someone says 'thirteenth floor,' I take 'em to the thirteenth floor. Someone says 'twenty-first floor,' I take 'em —"

Blake walked into the elevator. "Take me there," he ordered.

"The twenty-first floor? Sure."

"No, you — you —" Blake realized that the starter and elevator operator were grinning at each other sympathetically. "Not the twenty-first floor," he went on more calmly. "The thirteenth. Take me to the thirteenth floor."

The operator worked his switch and the door moaned itself shut. They went up. All of the McGowan Building elevators were very slow, and Blake had no trouble reading the floor numbers through the little window in the elevator door.

. . . *ten* . . . *eleven* . . . *twelve* . . . *fourteen* . . . *fifteen* . . . *sixteen* . . .

They stopped. The elevator operator scratched his head with his visored cap. Blake glared at him triumphantly. They went down.

. . . *fifteen* . . . *fourteen* . . . *twelve* . . . *eleven* . . . *ten* . . .
nine . . .

"Well?" Blake asked him.

The man shrugged. "It don't seem to be there now."

"Now? *Now?* It's *never* been there. So where did you take those men?"

"Oh, them. I told you: the thirteenth floor."

"But I just proved to you there is *no thirteenth floor!*"

"So what? You got the college education, Mr. Blake, not me. I just do my job. If you don't like it, all I can say is I just do my job. Someone gets in the elevator and says 'thirteenth floor,' I take —"

"I know! You take them to the thirteenth floor. But there is *no* thirteenth floor, you idiot! I can show you the blueprints of the building, the original blueprints, and I dare you, I defy you to show me a thirteenth floor. If you can show me a thirteenth floor . . ."

His voice trailed off as he realized they were back in the lobby and had attracted a small crowd.

"Look, Mr. Blake," the elevator man suggested. "If you're not satisfied, how's about I call up the delegate from the union and you and him have a talk? How's about that, huh?"

Blake threw his arms up helplessly and stamped back to his office. Behind him he heard the starter ask the elevator operator, "What was he getting in such an uproar about, Barney?"

"Aa-aah, that guy," the operator said. "He was blaming me for the blueprints of the building. If you ask me, he's got too much college education. What have I got to do with the blueprints?"

"I don't know," the starter sighed. "I sure as hell don't know."

"I'll ask you another question," the elevator operator went on, with a little more certainty, now that he saw his oratorical way, so to speak. "What have the building blueprints got to do with *me*?"

Blake closed the office door and leaned against it. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair.

"Miss Kerstenberg," he said at last in a strangled voice. "What do you think? Those cranks that were here yesterday — those two crazy old men — the home office went and rented the thirteenth floor to them!"

She looked up from her typewriter. "It *did*?"

"And believe it or not, they just went upstairs and took possession of their offices."

She smiled at him, a rapid woman-smile. "How *nice*," she said. And went back to her typing.

The morning after *that*, what Blake saw in the lobby sent him scurrying to the telephone. He dialed the home office. "Mr. Gladstone Jimm," he demanded breathlessly.

"Listen, Mr. Jimm. This is Sydney Blake at the McGowan. Mr. Jimm, this is getting serious! They're moving in furniture today. Office furniture. And I just saw some men go upstairs to install telephones. Mr. Jimm, they're really moving in!"

Gladstone Jimm was instantly alert. He gave the matter his full attention. "Who's moving in, my boy? Tanzen Realty Corporation? Or is it the Blair Brothers again? I was saying only last week: things have been far too quiet in the real estate field; I've felt in my bones that last year's Code of Fair Practices wouldn't be standing up much longer. Try to raid our properties, will they?" He snorted long and belligerently. "Well, the old firm has a few tricks up its sleeve yet. First, make certain that all important papers — tenant lists, rent receipts, don't overlook anything, son — are in the safe. We'll have three attorneys and a court order down there in half an hour. Meanwhile, you keep —"

"You don't understand, sir. It's those new tenants. The ones you rented the thirteenth floor to."

Gladstone Jimm ground to a full stop and considered the matter. Ah. He understood. He began to beat swords into ploughshares.

"You mean — those fellows — um, Toombs and Boole?"

"That's right, sir. There are desks and chairs and filing cabinets going upstairs. There are men from the telephone and electric companies. They're all going up to the thirteenth floor. Only, Mr. Jimm, *there isn't any thirteenth floor!*"

A pause. Then: "Any of the other tenants in the building been complaining, Blake?"

"No, Mr. Jimm, but —"

"Have Toot and Boob committed any sort of nuisance?"

"No, not at all. It's just that I —"

"It's just that you have been paying precious little attention to business! Blake, I like you, but I feel it is my duty to warn you that you are getting off on the wrong foot. You've been resident agent at the McGowan for almost a week now and the only bit of important business involving the property had to be transacted by the home office. That's not going to look good on your record, Blake, it's not going to look good at all. Do you still have those big vacancies on the third, sixteenth and nineteenth floors?"

"Yes, Mr. Jimm, I've been planning to —"

"Planning isn't enough, Blake. Planning is only the first step. After that, there must be action! *Action*, Blake: A-C-T-I-O-N. Why don't you try this little stunt: Letter the word *action* on a sign, letter it in bright red and hang it opposite your desk where you'll see it every time you look up. Then on the reverse side, list all the vacancies in your building. Every time you find yourself staring at that sign, ask yourself how many vacancies are still listed on the back. And then, Blake, take action!"

"Yes, sir," Blake said, very weakly.

"Meanwhile, no more of this nonsense about law-abiding, rent-paying

tenants. If they leave you alone, you leave them alone. That's an order, Blake."

"I understand that, Mr. Jimm."

He sat for a long while looking at the cradled telephone. Then he rose and walked out to the lobby and into an elevator. There was a peculiar and unaccustomed jauntiness to him, a recklessness to his stride that could be worn only by a man deliberately disobeying a direct order from the reigning head of Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate.

Two hours later he crept back, his shoulders bent, his mouth loose with defeat.

Whenever Blake had been in an elevator full of telephone linemen and furniture movers on their way to the thirteenth floor, there had been no thirteenth floor. But as soon as, a little irritated, they had changed elevators, leaving him behind, so far as he could tell they had gone right up to their destination. It was obvious. For him there was no thirteenth floor. There probably never would be.

He was still brooding on the injustice of it at 5 o'clock, when the scrubwomen who were coming on duty bounced their aged joints into his outer office to punch the time clock. "Which one of you," he asked, coming at them suddenly with an inspiration, "which one of you takes care of the thirteenth floor?"

"I do."

He drew the woman in the bright green fringed shawl after him into his private office. "When did you start cleaning the thirteenth floor, Mrs. Ritter?"

"Why, the day the new tenants moved in."

"But before that . . ." He waited, watching her face anxiously.

She smiled, and several wrinkles changed their course. "Before that, Lord love you, there was no tenants. Not on the thirteenth."

"So . . ." he prompted.

"So there was nothing to clean."

Blake shrugged and gave up. The scrubwoman started to walk away. He put his hand on her shoulder and detained her. "What," he asked, staring at her enviously, "what is it like — the thirteenth floor?"

"Like the twelfth. And the tenth. Like any other floor."

"And everyone," he muttered to himself, "everyone gets to go there. Everyone but me."

He realized with annoyance that he'd spoken too loudly. And that the old woman was staring at him with her head cocked in sympathy. "Maybe that's because," she suggested softly, "you have no reason to be on the thirteenth floor."

He was still standing there, absorbing the concept, when she and her colleagues bumped and clattered their way upstairs with mops, brooms and metal pails.

There was a cough and the echo of cough behind him. He turned. Mr. Tohu and Mr. Bohu bowed. Actually, they seemed to fold and unfold.

"For the lobby directory," said the tall man, giving Blake a white business card. "This is how we are to be listed."

G. TOHU & K. BOHU

*Specialists in
Intangibles*

For the Trade

Blake struggled, licked his lips, fought his curiosity and lost. "What kind of intangibles?"

The tall man looked at the tiny man. The tiny man shrugged. "Soft ones," he said.

They walked out.

Blake was positive he saw the tall man pick up the tiny man a moment before they stepped into the street. But he couldn't see what he did with him. And then there was the tall man walking down the street all by himself.

From that day on, Sydney Blake had a hobby. Trying to work out a good reason for visiting the thirteenth floor. Unfortunately, there just wasn't any *good* reason so long as the tenants created no nuisances and paid their rent regularly.

Month in, month out, the tenants paid their rent regularly. And they created no nuisances. Window washers went up to wash windows. Painters, plasterers and carpenters went up to decorate the offices on the thirteenth floor. Delivery boys staggered up under huge loads of stationery. Even what were obviously customers went up to the thirteenth floor, a group of people curiously lacking characteristics in common: they ranged from poor backwoods folk in their brogans to flashily dressed bookmakers; an occasional group of dark-suited, well-tailored gentlemen discussing interest rates and new bond issues in low well-bred voices would ask the elevator operator for Tohu & Bohu. Many, many people went to the thirteenth floor.

Everyone, Sydney Blake began to think, but Sydney Blake. He tried sneaking up on the thirteenth floor by way of the stairs. He always arrived on the fourteenth floor or the twelfth completely winded. Once or twice, he'd tried stowing away on the elevator with G. Tohu and K. Bohu them-

selves. But the car had not been able to find their floor while he was in the elevator. And they had both turned around and smiled at the spot where he was trying to stay hidden in the crowd so that he had gone out, red-faced, at the earliest floor he could.

Once he'd even tried — vainly — to disguise himself as a building inspector in search of a fire hazard. . . .

Nothing worked. He just had no business on the thirteenth floor.

He thought about the problem day and night. His belly lost its slight plumpness, his nails their manicure, his very trousers their crease.

And nobody else showed the slightest interest in the tenants of the thirteenth floor.

Well, there *was* the day that Miss Kerstenberg looked up from her typewriter. "Is that how they spell their names?" she asked. "T-O-H-U and B-O-H-U? Funny."

"What's funny?" He pounced on her.

"Those names come from the Hebrew. I know because," she blushed well below the neckline of her dress, "I teach in a Hebrew School Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights. And my family is very religious so I had a real orthodox education. I think religion is a good thing, especially for a girl —"

"*What about those names?*" He was almost dancing around her.

"Well, in the Hebrew Bible, before God created the Earth, the Earth was *tohu oobohu*. The *oo* means *and*. And *tohu* and *bohu*, gee, it's hard to translate."

"Try," he implored her. "Try."

"Oh, for example, the usual English translation of *tohu oobohu* is *without form and void*. But *bohu* really means *empty* in a lot of —"

"Foreigners," he chortled. "I knew they were foreigners. And up to no good. With names like that."

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Blake," she said very stiffly. "I don't agree with you at all about those names being no good. Not when they come from the Hebrew." And she never showed him any friendliness again.

Two weeks later, Blake got a message from the home office of Wellington Jimm & Sons, Inc., Real Estate that almost shoved his reason off the corner of the slippery throne it still occupied. Tohu & Bohu had given notice. They were quitting the premises at the end of the month.

For a day or so, he walked around talking to himself. The elevator operators reported hearing him say things like: "They're the most complete foreigners there could be — they don't even belong in the physical universe!" The scrubwomen shivered in their locker room as they told each other of the mad, mad light in his eyes as he'd muttered, with enormous

gestures: "Of course — thirteenth floor. Where else do you think they could stay, the nonexistent so-and-so's. *Hah!*" And once when Miss Kers-tenberg had caught him glaring at the water cooler and saying, "They're trying to turn the clock back a couple of billion years and start all over, I bet. *Filthy* fifth columnists!" she thought tremulously of notifying the F. B. I., but thought better of it. After all, she reasoned, once the police start snooping around a place you never can tell who they'll send to jail.

And, besides, after a little while, Sydney Blake straightened out. He began shaving every morning once more and the darkness left his nails. But he was definitely not the crisp young realtor of yore. There was a strange, skirling air of triumph about him almost all the time.

Came the last day of the month. All morning, load after load of furniture had been carried downstairs and trucked away. As the last few packages came down, Sydney Blake, a fresh flower in his buttonhole, walked up to the elevator nearest his office and stepped inside.

"Thirteenth floor, if you please," he said clearly and resonantly.

The door slid shut. The elevator rose. It stopped on the thirteenth floor.

"Well, Mr. Blake," said the tall man. "This is a surprise. And what can we do for you?"

"How do you do, Mr. Tohu?" Blake said to him. "Or is it Bohu?" He turned to his tiny companion. "And you, Mr. Bohu — or, as the case may be, Tohu — I hope you are well? Good."

He walked around the empty, airy offices for a little while and just looked. Even the partitions had been taken down. The three of them were alone, on the thirteenth floor.

"You have some business with us?" the tall man inquired.

"Of course he has business with us," the tiny man told him crossly. "He has to have some sort of business with us. Only I wish he'd hurry up and get it over, whatever it is."

Blake bowed. "*Paragraph ten, Section three of your lease: . . . the tenant further agrees that such notice being duly given to the landlord, an authorized representative of the landlord, such as the resident agent if there is one on the property, shall have the privilege of examining the premises before they are vacated by the tenant for the purpose of making certain that they have been left in good order and condition by the tenant. . . .*"

"So that's your business," said the tall man thoughtfully.

"It had to be something like that," said the tiny man. "Well, young fellow, you will please be quick about it."

Sydney Blake strolled about leisurely. Though he felt a prodigious excitement, he had to admit that there was no apparent difference between the thirteenth and any other floor. Except — Yes, except —

He ran to a window and looked down. He counted. Twelve floors. He looked up and counted. Twelve floors. And with the floor he was on, that made twenty-five. Yet the McGowan was a twenty-four-story building. Where did that extra floor come from? And how did the building look from the outside at this precise moment when his head was sticking out of a window on the thirteenth floor?

He walked back in, staring shrewdly at G. Tohu and K. Bohu. They would know.

They were standing near the elevator door which was open. An operator, almost as impatient as the two men in black, said, "Down? Down?"

"Well, Mr. Blake," said the tall man. "Are the premises in good condition, or are they not?"

"Oh, they're in good condition, all right," Blake told him. "But that's not the point."

"Well, *we* don't care what the point is," said the tiny man to the tall man. "Let's get out of here."

"Quite," said the tall man. He bent down and picked up his companion. He folded him once backwards and once forwards. Then he rolled him up tightly and shoved him in the right-hand overcoat pocket. He stepped backwards into the elevator. "Coming, Mr. Blake?"

"No, thank you," Blake said. "I've spent far too much time trying to get up here to leave it this fast."

"Suit yourself," said the tall man. "Down," he told the elevator operator.

When he was all alone on the thirteenth floor, Sydney Blake expanded his chest. It had taken so long! He walked over to the door of the staircase that he'd tried to find so many times, and pulled on it. It was stuck. Funny. He bent down and peered at it closely. It wasn't locked. Just stuck. Have to get the repairman up to take care of it.

Never could tell. Might have an extra floor to rent in the old McGowan from now on. Ought to be kept up.

How *did* the building look from the outside? He found himself near another window and tried to look out. Something stopped him. The window was open, yet he couldn't push his head past the sill. He went back to the window he'd looked out of originally. Same difficulty.

And suddenly he understood.

He ran to the elevator and jabbed his fist against the button. He held it there while his breathing went faster and faster. Through the diamond-shaped windows on the doors, he could see elevators rising and elevators descending. But they wouldn't stop on the thirteenth floor.

Because there no longer was a thirteenth floor. Never had been one, in fact. Who ever heard of a thirteenth floor in the McGowan Building. . . .

Of course, the theme of symbiosis is not new in science fiction; and it has been treated, in widely disparate ways, by such masters of the craft as Eric Frank Russell and Theodore Sturgeon. But, as we've remarked before many times, no theme is too old to merit a new variation. Basically, the relationship William Morrison describes is similar to that of man and his internal symbiotes, but Mr. Morrison has staged his drama on a far planet and, with considerable good humor and skillful extrapolation, reversed the usual roles of all concerned.

The Inner Worlds

by WILLIAM MORRISON

THE MOST IMPORTANT thing about Raldo was not what he was, but his knowledge of what he was. And the fact that he knew the kind of world he lived in, and had long since grown accustomed to taking it for granted.

He was feeling hungry now, and as there was little chance of food coming conveniently to him, he decided that he had better go to meet it. He plunged into the muddy red stream that led upward between pale narrow walls, floating without effort, and letting the current carry him so long as it ran with fair speed. When it slowed down and lost its momentum in a network of narrow channels, he began to swim. Finally, he had to crawl out and drag himself over the soft ground. His storehouse was a short distance ahead, and the thought of it was beginning to make him ravenous.

He had just reached it and begun to feed when a vibration reached him. "Raldo, this is Penko calling. Where are you?"

"I'm feeding, and I'd prefer not to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry, but there is no choice. We have visitors. Invaders."

"Invaders? What kind?"

"Complete strangers," said Penko. "Like nothing we have ever encountered before."

"Are they endos?"

"Don't be silly. If they were endos, they'd be no trouble. They're no rivals of ours."

"Oh. How big are they? Bigger than our worlds?"

"Smaller, I think. Unfortunately we do not have exact information."

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

"Pass the word along, and get to your observation post. We have to find out about them."

"Do you know whether they are dangerous?"

"Again there is no exact information, but those I've spoken to think there can be no doubt about it. They must be very capable, or else they'd never have reached us from outer space in the first place."

"That seems logical," admitted Raldo.

"And if they're capable, they're dangerous. Our worlds are *not* capable."

"True enough. All right, Penko, I'll pass the word along and do as you say. Just as soon as I've eaten."

"You'd better eat in a hurry. This is important."

"So is my state of nutrition. Would you want me to collapse of hunger while I'm observing?"

Penko made a sour remark to the effect that there was little chance of that happening with a pig like Raldo, but Raldo wasn't listening any more. He was feeding again. And thinking.

As Penko said, rival endos were no trouble at all. They had never yet run across rivals who had anywhere near their own intelligence, and when it came to a showdown, intelligence was the thing that counted. No, the real danger was something they had always foreseen, and had now at last encountered — enemies from outer space. The question was, just how capable and how hostile these enemies were. They were probably at least as intelligent as Raldo and his friends. And they had control of their environment to an extent no endo could possibly have.

Raldo hadn't intended to let himself be hurried, but the thought of the danger spurred him on to eat more rapidly than he had meant to, and he hoped that indigestion wouldn't make him swell up more than was normal. Even as he hoped, however, he was already in motion, crawling away from his storehouse, back to the soft ground, and then into the muddy stream again. This time he let it carry him to its junction with another stream, and then he floated up the second channel. As he drifted along, he began calling others — first Quero, and then Zekro, and Yerlo. And he knew that like him, they too would soon be hurrying to their observation posts.

The final part of the journey had to be made over fairly dry territory, through narrow corridors that pursued a twisting and winding way up hill and down. It would have been a bewildering trip to any one but Raldo, and even he had to stop and rest before plunging into the last corridor.

But he did not rest long. The ground was shaking under him, and he knew what that meant. His world was in motion. Presently there might be something to see.

He reached the screen, and settled down into his usual comfortable resting place. The image on the screen was changing. Sometimes it changed slowly, sometimes rapidly. But for a long time, none of the images was of a kind unfamiliar to him. Space looked as it always had, interesting enough as it ran through a riot of colors in no more than a second, but inaccessible to such as him, and certainly not dangerous.

And then, at last, something new appeared. Something he had never before seen in space. But the image was small and distant, and it did not grow very large before it whipped quickly out of sight. It did not appear again.

Under him the ground was shaking violently. Raldo had no need to be told what had happened. His world had caught sight of the strange world and was running away.

He began to call Penko, to inform him. And rather wistfully, he became aware that considerable time had passed. He was hungry again.

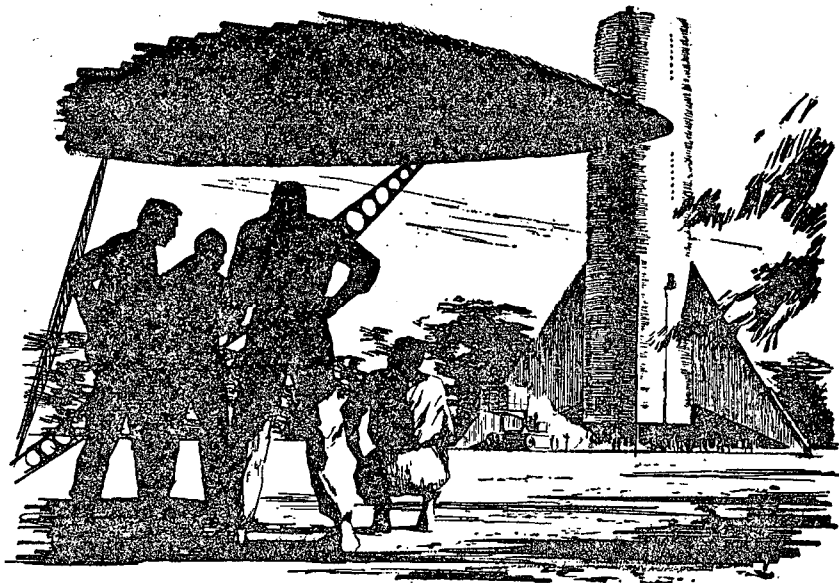
This time, however, he knew he had better not leave his post. And so he lay there and suffered. He could feel himself growing smaller by the moment. I'm shrinking away to nothing, he told himself gloomily, I'm losing all my strength. And his hatred of the invaders from outer space, whom he blamed for his torture, grew and grew.

On the camp site they had chosen, the group of men from the ship, far from shrinking away, had just satisfied their hunger. The ground here was relatively harmless, and the thin metal layer they had used to cover it was protection enough. Half a dozen buildings of metal and plastic had been set up in a clearing in the forest to provide more convenient working space than was possible on the ship itself, but there were as yet no sleeping quarters. These would come only after the area had been thoroughly decontaminated.

Chief Engineer McKenzie, a small wiry man who did not like enforced idleness, was saying impatiently, "There's nothing for me or my men to do here, Captain. Not yet, anyway. Right now this is a job for the biologists and I wish they'd get on with it."

Captain Gonzales shrugged. "It shouldn't be much of a job for such splendidly trained men. People who studied — and taught — at the best universities. What do you think, Chao?"

Chao, a tall, fair-haired man with a ruddy complexion, had been a professor before he took on his present assignment, and he had retained much of his professorial manner. Impervious to minor irritations, he said seriously, "Please do not underestimate the problem, Captain. In theory, it is true, the simplest method would be to hunt the creatures down. Sooner



or later, that would prove effective. Unfortunately, that might be later rather than sooner. And I have been given to understand that back home the Council has indicated a desire to make the planet inhabitable at the earliest possible moment."

"Yes, it's in a hurry. And I think you're right about hunting the things. If we tried to track them down all over this planet, there'd be no end to the job, especially after they began to learn about us."

"I should hardly let that consideration disturb me," said Chao. "They are of too low an order of intelligence to learn much. The difficulty that concerns me arises from the fact that the more we kill, the more scarce the species becomes, and the more difficult it will be to hunt down the few that are left. And so long as any of the creatures remain in existence, this planet can hardly be considered safe for us."

"What would you suggest then, Chao?" asked the Captain. "Poison?"

"No, not poison. Unintelligent or not, they'd soon learn to avoid that. I was thinking, Captain, of hitting them suddenly, of destroying the entire species with one blow. Biological warfare as it should be waged. For biological purposes."

McKenzie shook his head and said, "I don't like that, Captain. Any biological weapon we use is liable to turn against us."

Chao smiled amusedly. "There is little chance of that. They're warm-blooded animals, like us, but their normal body temperature is no more than 30° Centigrade. Any microorganism or parasite that adapted to that would be adapting *away* from our own temperature. Their blood chemistry is completely different from ours too. Based as it is on a cobalt-uranyl complex, it would not be susceptible to attack by the organisms that attack us. And any organisms that did assail it would certainly be harmless to us."

"He makes it sound reasonable," said McKenzie, still distrustful. "But I still don't like it."

Captain Gonzales frowned. "Neither do I. If it's the only way, however, we may be forced to use it. How about it, Chao, do you have an organism in stock that might do the trick?"

"I have half a dozen possibilities. At least one of them should prove suitable."

"How would you use it?"

"We have trapped approximately twenty species of smaller animals. At least two of them seem to be used as food by the large ones we wish to eliminate. We infect the small ones with the proper parasites and turn them loose. I think we can count on them to spread the disease effectively enough."

"But I don't want to take any chances of the plan's backfiring. I want you to make a thorough study before you put your scheme into operation."

"Any study I make will be thorough. A day or two will suffice."

"Meanwhile, McKenzie, what about decontaminating the areas those beasts have made uninhabitable?"

"It isn't worth doing, Captain. Right now, there are enough places for large settlements. The other areas, those where the Geiger count is too high for safety, are slowly decontaminating themselves. The uranium is washing out of the soil from one rain to the next."

"It doesn't rain often enough," growled Captain Gonzales.

"It will be often enough if we prevent new contamination. We just have to keep the beasts away until we can finish them off altogether. And if any of them die around here accidentally, we have to detect the bodies in a hurry, and drag them to a common burial ground."

"In the meantime," added Chao, "we decrease the chances of new contamination by slaughtering them as rapidly as possible. Speed," he added professorially, "is of the essence."

Gonzales was annoyed. In Chao's academic manner he detected an unpleasant kind of condescension, as if the man were explaining things to a slow-witted child. He growled, "You don't have to keep convincing me. Get on with your virus or bacillus, or whatever it is."

"It is neither. It is a parasitic protozoan."

"Send it on its way. Let the slaughter begin."

The pangs of hunger had grown as Raldo shrank. But not until he was in actual danger of death did he leave his post. Then he said to himself, "A dead endo is a useless endo. I can do no good by staying here any longer. I must get more food, and return large and healthy."

And he began slowly to make the trip back to his storehouse.

He moved with less certainty now, with obvious weakness. At his largest, directly after feeding, he was by human measurements little more than half an inch in diameter, with a thickness of three-eighths of an inch. Now his shrunken body had assumed the shape of an ellipsoid, about seven-sixteenths of an inch in its longest axis, and with a thickness that he himself would have called negligible. His cilia whipped ineffectively as he crawled along the almost dry ground. When it came to swimming, he thought, they would be useless altogether.

It won't do, he told himself, I'll never make it like this. Either I find something to eat on the way, or I'll just keel over and faint. Right now I don't have the strength to communicate with Penko or the others.

He stopped to rest before he crawled into the channel by which he had approached the screen. To rest, and to think. I won't be able to swim, he thought. I must fill myself at any cost. Nutritious or not nutritious, I have to eat *something*. Maybe the psychological effect will give me strength.

He sank his feeding tube into the ground. "Ugh!" he said mentally. The taste was unpleasant, the nutritive value of what he was absorbing doubtful. Raldo was an endoparasite, and although he could live anywhere within the body of his huge host, he could absorb food effectively only from the large liver-like organ that he considered his personal storehouse. And from one other source, which he thought wistfully had not for some time made itself available.

None the less, he forced himself to absorb the unpalatable stuff from the ground below until he had swelled out a bit. And for a moment he did feel as if strength were returning to his body. He plunged boldly into the reddish-brown stream, and began to swim along.

The feeling of strength did not last long. It gave way to a sensation of bloatedness, accompanied by a resentful hunger. A peculiar lassitude attacked him. There was no question about it, he was feeling worse than before. Where previously he had needed only to propel his own thin body along, now he had to drag with him a mass of inert stuff. He had been a fool. He should never have tried to eat something he obviously couldn't digest. The only thing to do now was to bring it up.

He did, and felt better. But he knew that the chances of reaching his storehouse were still against him.

I'm stupid, he thought, we endos are all stupid. We're so busy using our intelligence, we outsmart ourselves. Our remote ancestors didn't think they were clever, but they were sensible enough never to leave the neighborhood of their storehouses. *They* never suffered from hunger — unless their hosts starved. Or unless their hosts died from natural causes, which we can often prevent now by this supposed intelligence of ours. Or unless —

But what have we here? he suddenly asked himself. A quiver of eagerness ran through him. Something has happened to this stream. There are cells destroyed, there are strange chemicals in the fluid, there's something going on here that shouldn't be. An invader, a rival endo! That rare, that delicious food, so long untasted!

All his previous weakness forgotten, he spurted forward with superendine strength, following the trail of the invader by the altered chemistry of the blood stream. And around the bend of a small arteriole he found the creature itself. A small one-celled animal, even larger now than his own shrunken body, but no match for him. Weakened as he was, he would have tackled an enemy twice his size. The bigger the enemy, the greater the supply of food.

He closed in without giving the other a chance to think. It would have made little difference anyway, he realized, for the other had no intelligence, nothing to think with. There was a sharp struggle, and then a tiny bolt of high-voltage radiation, accompanied by a flash of light, and the invader lay paralyzed. Raldo at once began to absorb it.

This time the strength that began to fill his body was real strength, based on the energy that came from nutrient substances, and not on the glow of false hope. He moved ahead vigorously. *Now*, he thought, there's no question about my reaching the storehouse. I'll get there in plenty of time. And will I gorge myself! Will I fill this skin of mine —

But he wasn't destined to reach the storehouse. He didn't have to. Floating through the liquid came the scent of more of the strange chemical. Another invader. His other source of food was available in even greater quantity than he had expected.

Like the first, this one gave him no trouble. Nor did the one after that, nor the one after *that*. For a time he raged through one channel after another, snapping them up, digesting them as he moved, and looking for the next. Then he began to move slowly again, as slowly as when he had been dying from hunger. He closed with one more invader and then he came to a stop. The thing was paralyzed and helpless, but he couldn't eat it. Not yet. He was swollen to the limit. The very thought of going to his storehouse

and eating more almost made him sick. He was so full he could hardly think. Time to call Penko, he thought lazily. Time to let him know what's been happening.

"Hello, Penko? I have news for you."

"For your information, I am no longer Penko. And I have some news for you. Where have you been? I've been trying to call you."

"I've been starving. For a time I thought I was a goner. Couldn't even reach my storehouse. And then an invader came along."

"An invader! You sound as if you'd swallowed a dozen of them!"

"I have. Ah, Penko, I feel good. Bloated, but good. Think I'm going to take a nap."

"You pig, you're too full to think straight. I told you I was no longer Penko. Don't you realize what that means? Stop thinking of your swollen skin, and think of other skins for a change. Think of our race."

Poor Penko, he told himself lazily, he doesn't know any better than to preach to a full endo. Wonder if he said anything important. "What's the matter, Penko?" he asked. "Are you hungry? Would you like a nice little dish of invader?"

"I've had my dish of invader. I've had two dozen dishes."

That penetrated. "What? You're joking!"

"I am not joking. There are probably another dozen swimming around in your world right now. You've got to clean them out before they multiply. Do what I did. If you wait too long they'll kill your world altogether."

"But I'm so full — I feel so lazy —"

"You know what'll happen to *you* if your world dies. Hurry up, there isn't a moment to waste."

He's right, thought Raldo, he's a nuisance and a kill-joy, but he's right. It's a matter of life and death. *My* life and death.

Penko isn't Penko any more. Of course. And now Raldo can't be Raldo. What a pity, when Raldo is feeling so good.

He began to transform to his fast hunting shape. His skin changed texture and stretched. And his body stretched with it. Seconds later he was a thin and agile snake-like creature more than two inches long, built for speed. And he was ravenous again. The first thing he did was eat the invader he had previously paralyzed but had been unable to consume.

Then he began his hunt for the rest. Up one channel and down another he flashed. His chemical detectors were ten times as sensitive now as they had been in his previous form. The invaders might have increased rapidly in the time he had been so foolish as to give them, but their numbers would do them no good now. He was prowling through all the vital spots first, the organs of his host that were most sensitive to attack, and he cleaned them

up, as rapidly as possible, getting rid of a dozen invaders in the process.

His new form was also beginning to feel bloated, but he knew what to do about that. This time he didn't dare let himself feel lazy. He split into a pair of creatures like the disk-like kind he had previously been, and these at once transformed into the snake forms. At the moment of fission, each had all the knowledge and memories the single previous form had possessed. They were Raldo I and Raldo II, and no lengthy consultation was needed for them to decide what to do. They divided up the remaining organs between them and each raced off immediately in pursuit of invading parasites.

A short time later, when they met again, they were able to report a complete cleanup. Raldo I had devoured twenty-one parasites, Raldo II sixteen. They no longer looked like identical twins, and they no longer thought exactly alike.

"What do we do now?" asked Raldo II.

"I *think*," said Raldo I, "that you commit suicide."

Raldo II drew away from him. "Why me?"

"Because there's room for only one of us in one world. You know that as well as I do. And all the rules are on my side. I've swallowed more invaders, I'm bigger. I have a bigger reserve of food. I'll be less of a drain on the storehouse."

Raldo II thought that over. "Don't be in such a hurry to get rid of me," he said. "I may be needed. There may be more invaders."

"If there are, I'll handle them."

"There may be other dangers. These invaders didn't get here of their own will. The world-scale invaders from outer space sent them. And we don't know what will happen next."

Raldo I looked sourly at his twin. "You are full of objections to doing away with yourself. Don't get the idea that you're going to stay here indefinitely. And above all, don't get the idea that you may find a way to get rid of me and take over."

"I'm not trying to take over. But we may run across another world that I can use. And meanwhile, we can work together. Neither of us will need food for a long while, especially if we get back into disk shape."

"There's an idea," said Raldo I. "All right, we'll retransform. You first, though. I'm taking no chances."

Raldo II retransformed into a disk — a large disk, much greater than the original Raldo had ever been. Invaders were good food, better even than the host-world, and you grew large on them. A pity they didn't come along more often.

When he saw that Raldo II had definitely assumed the disk shape, Raldo I followed suit.

"Now," said Raldo II, "we'd better get in touch with Penko again."

"I'll get in touch with him," said Raldo I. "And by the way, I want it distinctly understood that this is *my* world. I'll give whatever orders have to be given here."

"I understand."

"You've been making too many suggestions."

"I was just trying to be helpful," said Raldo II.

"From now on, let me ask for help before you volunteer it."

He has too many ideas, thought Raldo I. Maybe he isn't as big as I am, but he thinks he's more intelligent. If he keeps this up, I'll just *insist* that he commit suicide. And if he puts up too much of an objection, I'll help him do it. It's a pretty sad state of affairs when an endo can't be master in his own world any more.

He called Penko. At once a confusion of voices answered:

"Hello, Raldo. Penko I receiving."

"Penko II receiving."

"Penko III receiving."

"Shut up, you two," said Penko I. "I'll do the talking. You can listen in if you want to; but don't interrupt. How did you make out, Raldo?"

"I'm Raldo I, to be exact. I see that you've split also. Twice."

"There was a secondary invasion. It was the only way to clean up."

"I've been wondering whether it wouldn't be a good idea to make our twins commit suicide."

"Possibly later," said Penko I. "Not now. We've got a job to do on those big invaders."

"Do we have more information about them?"

"Yes, it's been sent in by dozens of endos. Some of it is confusing, but I think the main outlines are clear. These world-size invaders came inside a superworld of their own."

"You mean," said Raldo I, "that they're functional endos too? It sounds incredible."

"I don't mean that at all. They're not endos of any kind. They appear to have created an artificial world in which they can travel through outer space. And outer outer space too, for all I know. That, however, is near speculation. The important thing is that they need this superworld to travel in. And only one superworld has been found. Which means that their number is limited."

"Ah. But perhaps they can increase rapidly —"

"Apparently not. There has been no increase in numbers since they arrived. But there may be an increase later."

"You're indulging in speculation again," said Raldo I.

"I'm just looking ahead to see what dangers threaten. And trying to forestall them. I have an idea that if we get rid of these invaders now, no others may follow."

"Wishful thinking," said Raldo I.

"Perhaps. At any rate, if we don't get rid of this bunch, they may get rid of us. They tried once, and they'll try again. Sooner or later, they'll succeed — unless we strike back."

"But why? What do they have against us?" demanded Raldo I.

"Nothing at all. I think they are not even aware of our existence. It is our worlds which are dangerous to them."

"Our worlds? How can they consider such stupid creatures to be dangerous?"

"It is a matter of incompatible metabolisms. Our worlds are radioactive because of their high uranium content. The invaders cannot tolerate more than a very low level of radioactivity. Therefore they must get rid of our worlds. It is as simple as that."

"Simple?" said Raldo I. "I don't see it. Why can't we just get our worlds to keep out of their way?"

"That wouldn't work. Sooner or later our worlds die, and then their bodies become sources of radioactive contamination. They have already distributed uranium through a good part of the surface soil. The invaders from outer space are greatly restricted in their movements because of that."

"If they had sense, they'd leave us alone and go to some part of space more adapted to them."

"Never mind what they'd do if they had sense," said Penko I. "Our job is to teach them sense. Or to get rid of them. Here's what we have to do. One of you go to the viewing screen."

"You do that, Raldo II."

"All right."

Penko I went on, "And you yourself had better go to the motor control centers of the brain. We intend to get our worlds moving together."

"When do we start?"

"I'll let you know. This is going to be a coordinated maneuver."

"Don't wait too long. I don't want to find myself dying of starvation again when I get the call to act."

"Don't worry, we'll act soon enough."

Penko I broke off. Raldo I said to his twin, "You heard us. We're traveling to our world's head. And remember, don't leave the screen until you get orders to do so."

"You can trust me," said Raldo II.

"Trust you?" said Raldo I to himself. "You must think I'm crazy."



He'd have to keep in touch with his twin, he told himself. Raldo II still might have the idea of stealing his world from him. If he caught the other endo sneaking toward the storehouse for more food, he'd know. And there'd be no more nonsense about delaying suicide. Raldo I would transform into the highly motile snake form and get rid of his rival for good.

Meanwhile, Raldo II made no untoward move. As Raldo I dragged himself into place near the motor control centers, he heard his twin's voice.

"I'm in position, One."

"Fine. Now stay there. And when we do start to move, let me know where we're going."

Raldo II said, "Of course."

As Raldo II lay near the large and complicated retina of his host's eye, he watched the image of the outer world as it filtered through. And his thoughts confirmed Raldo I's suspicions. He did think more than a little of what he might do to keep this world for his own. The idea of suicide, obligatory though it was, appealed to him no more than it did to his twin. And he had so little of filial or brotherly loyalty that he would have preferred to go on living, and let Raldo I take over the obligation of dying.

It wasn't a bad world, this creature that the Raldos inhabited. Too bad that there couldn't possibly be room for both of them on it. . . .

Encased in his flexible lead suit, Chao stared through lead-glass goggles with considerable distaste at the dead creature that lay before him. The thing had been spread out on a large slab in one of the temporary buildings not far from the ship. Captain Gonzales wouldn't have it on board, and Chao didn't blame him. The dissection of a bear-like animal seven feet long would have been a messy job in any case. The fact that the cadaver was radioactive, and would have to be handled through thick gloves, didn't make things any more pleasant for anyone concerned. However, this wasn't the first of the creatures he had dissected, and his previous experience would simplify and hasten the work.

He began to cut, his razor-thin searing knives slicing through the flesh easily enough. An assistant, likewise protected by lead, lent an occasional hand, removing organs, testing them, stowing them away, and labeling them. A second assistant took notes, while some distance away Captain Gonzales and McKenzie watched.

"I find no unduly high concentration of radioactive material in any organ," said Chao. "The uranium and its metallic disintegration products are fairly well distributed throughout the animal."

"Is it like all the others you've dissected?" asked the Captain.

"Essentially, yes. I find no indication so far of damage resulting from the parasites we spread." He fell silent, slicing through several layers of muscle, and stripping the layers aside. "Hello, here is something interesting. A dead parasite. Not the one we tried to introduce, but some other kind."

He held up on his probe a thin disklike blob about a half inch across. "I shall put this aside and examine it thoroughly later."

"Think it could have caused the big creature's death?" asked the Captain.

"I rather doubt that. I cannot be certain, of course, but — hello, here is another one. This one resembles a worm or snake. And here is something strange. A disk that tapers off into a snake-like tail. Rather reminiscent of a tadpole."

"Or a cross between the other two forms," suggested McKenzie.

"That is conceivable. The creature might have expired while in the process of change from one to the other. Well, cellular examination should tell."

"But there's no sign," said Captain Gonzales, "of the parasites we ourselves hoped to introduce?"

"None at all. I cannot understand what has happened. I can imagine various possibilities, it is true, but I cannot prove or disprove any of them until we have more definite facts at our disposal."

"Personally," said McKenzie, "I doubt that the parasites we introduced

did any killing. We haven't found a greater number of these dead animals than we found before. They must have a defense against parasites."

"Your logic, McKenzie, is hardly impeccable," said Chao. "There is no reason why we should find any greater number of dead animals than we have been finding all along. They do not come to us to die. They seek some isolated spot where they can perish in peace."

"Let's not argue about it on the basis of pure logic," said Captain Gonzales. "Like you, Chao, I always prefer to talk about facts. Do you have any that really mean anything?"

"I expect to have considerable data —"

"You expect. But right now you haven't a thing," said McKenzie. "Well, I *do* have something."

The others both looked at him. Captain Gonzales said, "Have you been keeping secrets, McKenzie?"

"No secrets, Captain. I just wanted to keep my mouth shut in order to let Chao go ahead without being influenced by me. I wanted to see what conclusion he'd reach independently. The fact is, these creatures are much more intelligent than we've been thinking they are."

Chao's eyebrows went up. "Absurd," he said. "Not only does their entire behavior betray a lack of intelligence, their anatomy confirms the fact. They have sizable brains, it is true, but the motor control centers are disproportionately large and very highly developed. The part of the brain that may be said to think, a pseudo-cerebrum, is small and not developed at all. In addition, the creatures have no system of communication that could possibly deserve to be called a language. Their vocal organs are stiff and inflexible, capable of producing only a small variety of sounds."

"I don't know anything about their anatomy," said McKenzie. "But you're wrong about their not communicating. They communicate more easily than we do. By radio."

"The man is insane," said Chao smugly. "Radio? They have no hands, no external organs capable of grasping and constructing complicated apparatus."

"Internal radio," explained McKenzie. "Look, my learned friend, if you'll climb down off your high professorial horse before it throws you, and do some listening for a change, you'll get the point. They're radioactive, as you know. Radioactivity, as you may also know, involves the emission of various rays."

"Let us not waste time explaining the ABC's of radioactivity," said Chao coldly. "Let us get to the point."

"I'm getting to it. I thought it might be interesting to make a record of the electromagnetic radiations in a forest such as the one around the ship."

Most of the animals and plants around here are also radioactive, although not to so great an extent, and if you listen in on the right wave lengths you can hear a real babel going on."

"The right wave lengths happen to be of gamma ray order."

"That's true in most cases," admitted McKenzie. "However, I've found a few cases of gamma rays modulated by waves in the visible and ultraviolet."

Chao's brows furrowed. Captain Gonzales demanded, "You're sure?"

It was McKenzie's turn to be smug. "Positive," he said. "Furthermore, these modulations don't stay put. They disappear for hours at a time from a certain carrier wave, and then return. They have a variety of wave form that can correspond only to the variety of a language. And there's one other fact that might interest you."

"Don't be dramatic," ordered Gonzales. "Spit it out."

McKenzie was annoyed, but he said, "Okay, I'll spit it. The things move around. I've put direction finders on them, and I've discovered that in some cases the carrier wave sources don't stay put, as they should do if the waves were all coming from plants. They don't stick close to the ground, as they would do if they were coming from small animals."

"How about tree climbers?" interposed Chao.

"They don't rise high into the air, as they would do if they came from birds or tree climbers. They go up to a height of six feet, and no higher. They come from animals like the one you're dissecting."

Chao was annoyed and irritated enough to make a vulgar and unprofessional sound, known for some reason which etymologists had never been able to puzzle out, as a Bronx cheer. McKenzie flushed, and said, "I stick to what I said. Radio signals are being emitted by animals like this one. If your dissection was worth a damn, you'd tell me what organ was doing it."

"I can tell you flatly that no organ is doing it. In fact, I can't see how any organ *could* do it."

"You're too easily baffled, Chao," said Captain Gonzales. "The carrier wave, of course, comes from uranium disintegration. The animal that's sending it may be able to control the power to some extent by separating or combining the uranium isotopes, and thus hastening or slowing nuclear breakdown."

"How about the modulatory wave?"

"From chemical changes, naturally. You're familiar with bioluminescence, aren't you? A simple chemical reaction in the living creature results in the emission of light, usually from external organs. Well, in this case the light is emitted internally, and the energy is used to modulate the carrier wave."

Chao looked shaken, and McKenzie said derisively, "By God, you did

need a lesson in the ABC's of the subject after all. Even *I* know that, and I'm an engineer, not a biologist."

Chao said defensively, "It is impossible for anyone to remember the mass of elementary material that's given in the primary schools. All the same, Captain, I still don't see—I couldn't find any organ—wait a moment!"

His face had suddenly brightened. McKenzie said, "Something's wrong. He seems to have an idea."

"I certainly do have an idea. Those parasites I just picked up!"

"Parasites?" said Captain Gonzales. "You think they're the ones sending the signals?"

"I've made a previous study of all the other organs. But I haven't studied the parasites. It's time that I did."

"Go to it, Chao," said Captain Gonzales, "Start studying."

They were still standing around, with McKenzie from time to time pacing nervously up and down, when Chao's microscalpel sliced through the thin cell. The biologist placed a thin sheet of the cell material on a slide and stared through his microscope.

"Well, I'll be —"

"I don't doubt it," snarled McKenzie. "What I want to know, however, is not what you'll be, but what you see."

"A tiny nervous system! I have no idea how the modulatory light waves are emitted, but there's no question of the fact that this is a nervous system—or a cell-wide brain, if you want to call it that. Here, take a look at it, while I prepare a slide of the snake-like one."

The Captain's eye was still at the microscope when a curious sound came from the forest outside. It reached them first as a faint rumble, which slowly grew louder. Captain Gonzales looked up and said uneasily, "Something unusual's going on. I'd better see what it is." He stepped outside.

The ground began to tremble. And now individual sounds began to come to them—low roars, as of beasts in fury, and as a shrill obbligato, the screams of small animals running for their lives, and the thin crackling of breaking branches.

"We're being attacked!" yelled the Captain. "To the ship, everybody!"

Even before he was finished yelling, they were all running. Chao and McKenzie had started late, but once they saw what was happening, they picked up speed. Sweeping in from the forest came a grim line of the large bear-like creatures that stretched farther than they could see into the forest, and behind the first line another one, and behind that still another. The creatures seemed driven by panic, but they moved with the precision of a military machine. Chao, who had not only been slow to leave his micro-

scalpel, but was hampered by his leaded suit, saw McKenzie leave him behind, and realized that he would never make the ship in time. He ran for a tree, and dragged himself up the trunk barely ahead of one of the animals. The creature dashed after him, then stopped as if in disappointment, and rushed on after its fellows. Inside the heavy suit, Chao panted and perspired.

One of the men had grabbed a gun and begun to fire, but Captain Gonzales didn't let him continue. "You won't make a dent on that line," he said, and dragged the man toward the ship. But a dent had been made. One of the huge creatures staggered and fell. The others moved on without noticing him.

As the roars of the beasts died away into the distance, Chao slipped down from his tree. Other men came out of the ship to join him. McKenzie said grimly, "Unintelligent, are they? They almost ruined us."

Captain Gonzales was estimating the damage. The place was a shambles. "They killed two men," he said quietly, "and wounded seven. And they wrecked the camp."

"They destroyed the specimens I was dissecting," added Chao accusingly, as if that were a greater disaster than the killing and wrecking.

They stared at the destruction for a moment, and Gonzales shrugged. "From now on, we'll have to take precautions against attack. And we don't have any idea what form the next attack will take. It's going to complicate matters."

A crewman came up and said excitedly, "Captain, remember that creature Clayborne shot? It can't move much, but it's still alive."

"Alive or dead, the thing's dangerous. Kill it."

"Wait a minute, Captain," said Chao eagerly. "We need a live specimen more than we do another dead one. Let's save it and put it in a cage. A leaded cage."

"Why? And how?"

"To answer your second question first, Captain, I can put the animal to sleep with an anesthetic spray," said Chao. "There will be no difficulty about that, I can assure you. As for the why — well, there, much as I hate to do so, I find myself in agreement with McKenzie. For many reasons. Firstly —"

"Skip it," said Gonzales. "You want the thing alive for purposes of study. All right, take it. But be careful. The brute's powerful, and we don't want any accidents happening to you. We want you in good condition."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Nothing personal about it. For the moment, you're important to us, that's all."

"Slight error, Captain," said McKenzie. "At this stage of the game, I'm the important one. What we have to do now is study the radiations from that thing. And radiations are my baby."

Chao was fixing his anesthetic spray, and McKenzie began to assemble his wave detector apparatus. A few moments later, the beast had been overcome and dragged into a transparent cage of steel-supported plastic, backed with lead glass. While it was still unconscious, McKenzie began to arrange tiny wave receivers at different points on the inside of the cage, attaching them inconspicuously to the plastic in the hope that the beast, when it revived, wouldn't notice and destroy them.

Gonzales yelled suddenly, "Look out!"

McKenzie started, and whirled around. The creature's large eyes were open. It still lay there on the floor of the cage in exactly the same position in which it had been left, but it was now staring at him blankly. He backed away from it and to one side, toward the door. This brought him out of the thing's line of sight, and the head suddenly swiveled around to keep him in view. Then the legs began to twitch. The huge beast half lifted itself, the eyes still blank, and staggered into the wall. There it collapsed and lay quiet again.

McKenzie slammed the door behind him and locked it. As he dried his perspiring forehead, he said accusingly to Chao, "I thought you put it to sleep for good."

"I did. Look at it. It's still unconscious."

"Then how did it move around? Its muscles didn't move themselves."

"Perhaps —" began Chao. "Perhaps those parasites — they had a nervous system — no, it's too fantastic."

"Don't be afraid of the fantastic, Chao," said Captain Gonzales. "You think they were *not* put to sleep, and they're pushing this big thing around from the inside?"

"The thought did occur to me. However, it seems entirely out of the question."

"God save me," said McKenzie savagely, "from a scientist who's afraid of his own imagination. It isn't out of the question, and I'm going to prove it."

He went over to his wave analyzer, and began to adjust the dials. "We're getting a gamma wave," he reported. "And it's modulated."

"Record it, quick!" said Gonzales. "I want records of everything!"

"I'm taking care of that, Captain. Wait a minute, there's another wave. Slightly different wave length. And let me check on the direction finders. I think — yes, it does. It comes from a slightly different part of the beast."

"The same part," corrected Chao, peering over his shoulder. "The head."

"There's a slight difference in angle. The wave sources are in different parts of the head." He stared at the other two. "One from in back of the eyes, to watch what goes on, one from the brain, to control movement. How does that strike you, Captain?"

"It's crazy."

"But it's what I find."

"Keep tuned in, McKenzie. Maybe we can make some sense out of this."

Raldo II said, "I can see nothing useful. You will have to turn the head again."

"There is no point to it," said Raldo I. "I cannot turn the head and at the same time control the muscles of locomotion. When our world keeps its eyes open of its own accord, and moves consciously, then I can direct its motion fairly well. But I cannot maintain control of half a dozen different sets of muscles at the same time."

"You are not trying," said Raldo II accusingly. "Try a little harder. Use a little more energy —"

Use a little more energy, thought Raldo I. So that's what you want me to do. Use up the slender store I have, and leave you in bigger, better condition than me. And then you'll claim that I am the one who has to commit suicide, and I won't be strong enough to resist you. Why, you dirty so-and-so.

He let the muscles relax, and slipped away from the brain, taking care not to emit any radiation that would betray his change of position. And he headed as fast as he could for the storehouse.

"They've both stopped broadcasting," said McKenzie. "But I have an idea they'll start again. Meanwhile, I'm going to build an automatic analyzer that will allow us to convert the modulation waves into sound. And then we'll have to start figuring out what their language means."

"We'll have to do some talking to them on our own," suggested Captain Gonzales.

"Right, Captain. As soon as we can."

Raldo I was not alone in his bright idea. He met his twin at the storehouse, and they maintained a strained silence as they filled themselves with food from the stock that each knew would not suffice very long for the two of them. Then Raldo I said, "We'd better get back to our positions. In case our world awakes, and there's an opportunity to escape, we must be able to take advantage of it."

"That's sensible," admitted Raldo II. And together they began to swim back, each with his attention centered warily on the other.

Captain Gonzales had thought of a way of speeding up the learning of the wave language. As the beast's eyes opened again, he and Chao held up before it various objects. McKenzie, meanwhile, coordinated the radiations that came from the beast's head with the other men's actions.

"Any parasites intelligent enough to direct the actions of their host will get an idea of what we're trying to do," said Gonzales. "One of those wave bursts will undoubtedly mean, 'They're trying to communicate with us'. And if the things want to cooperate, we'll learn their language in no time at all."

"It's a big 'if'," said McKenzie. "However, there's no harm in trying."

After a time, the effect of the anesthetic wore off, and the world of the two Raldos awoke and began to move about. This, however, did not affect the Raldos directly, and it was possible to follow their conversations just as easily as when the beast had been unconscious.

One important discovery came from the behavior of the beast itself. When Chao held up in lead-lined gloves a specimen of the radioactive plants which grew in the forest, the animal lunged toward him, clawing against the plastic in its efforts to break out.

"What a peculiar reaction," observed Chao.

"Peculiar my eye," said McKenzie. "The thing is hungry, and this must be what he eats. Throw the stuff in to him."

McKenzie was right. They had discovered the animal's food, and they learned now that once it had enough to eat it was an extremely docile and easily managed beast. At the same time, the wave bursts that came from within also indicated great excitement.

"Those parasites depend for food on their host," said Chao. "They must be happy too that it is feeding so well."

"If they're happy," said McKenzie, "I'm happy. Because it means that we can speed up learning their language."

At the end of a week they made their first attempts to communicate with the parasites. Some of the initial conversations were either meaningless or exceedingly confused, but the very difficulties made it possible for them to correct their mistakes. Another day, and the two worlds were genuinely beginning to understand each other.

Raldo I demanded, "Why did you come to this part of space? It has belonged to us from the time our ancestors were mindless, free-floating protozoans. It is still ours."

"It is still ours," echoed Raldo II.

"Quiet, Two. I'll do the talking here."

Captain Gonzales said, "We had no idea there was intelligent life on this planet."

"You have now. If you know what is good for you, leave us and go back where you belong."

"Fierce little devil," growled McKenzie, but not into the microphone. "Imagine a thing that size threatening us."

"Perhaps," said Gonzales persuasively, "we could work out a way which would permit us to live together."

"There is no way but for you to return to your own space. The very existence of our worlds is a threat to you. They are radioactive, their food is radioactive, their surroundings are radioactive. They spread the radioactivity. You *must* get rid of them for your own sake. And getting rid of them means getting rid of us."

The thing, thought Gonzales, was unpleasantly close to the truth.

"This one world of ours is your captive. But the others are free and will remain free. We shall protect them and fight back. We shall learn to control our worlds better than ever, and we shall drive you from our space."

"That will not be so easy," said Gonzales coldly. "We have greater powers than you realize."

"And ours are greater than *you* realize."

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. McKenzie muttered, "Damn it, maybe that thing *can* carry out its threats."

"You have been warned," said Raldo I. "Go before we drive you away."

They didn't go. They held several consultations, and they radioed home for instructions. From time to time, bursts of radiation continued to come from the beast, but now they were incomprehensible.

"They've changed their code," said McKenzie in dismay. "And this time they're not going to help us break it."

From time to time others of the huge beasts could be seen or heard in the forest, but only at a distance. Whatever the group of parasites inside them was planning, it was not likely to be a mass attack like the previous one. Captain Gonzales had set up his defenses, and he was not going to be caught by surprise again.

Meanwhile, he continued to consult with McKenzie and Chao. War would seriously harm both sides. Cooperation was needed, but first there had to be a basis for it. Did the parasites have any benefits to gain from human friendship? They did, and Chao, in his academic way, began to list what the benefits were.

But that wasn't the difficulty. "The real question," said McKenzie, "is this: What do we have to gain from them?"

"Nothing," replied Gonzales. "They're a nuisance, they'll always be a nuisance. They and their hosts simply occupy land that we want."

"In that case, no cooperation is possible," said Chao.

"And they're smart enough to know it," added McKenzie. "That's why they'll never trust us. They know that we'll always resent their presence, that we'll always regard them as a necessary evil."

"Because at best," observed Gonzales, "that's what they are."

"Then you think, Captain, that there must necessarily be a war of extermination?" asked Chao.

"It looks inevitable to me."

McKenzie said irritably, "Nothing's inevitable. We've only talked to them once. Let's try it again."

"Suppose they don't answer?" asked Gonzales.

"Then it'll be a one-way conversation."

"What will you say? What will you offer them?"

"I won't offer anything. I'll ask them for *their* offer."

"No," said Gonzales. "That's bad tactics. You offer something, they offer something, and eventually you compromise. You can't come to them without any idea of what you want."

"Of course not," agreed Chao. "That would be a confession of intellectual bankruptcy."

"And what kind of intellectual bank account would you suggest we open, Mr. Mighty Mind?" snarled McKenzie.

"I do not resent your sneers," said Chao with dignity. "I should merely like to point out that the academic mind, at which you are accustomed to cast aspersions, is a balanced mind, a mind which considers a question from every point of view before arriving at a decision. It takes into account the most varied factors, even those which strike the vulgar as trifling and unimportant. In our previous conversational encounter with these intelligent parasites I have noted certain interesting phenomena. Firstly —"

"Skip it and come to the point, chum. What would *you* offer them?"

"I have nothing concrete in prospect. I was merely making some general observations which I consider pertinent."

"Nothing concrete, eh? You know something, Chao? In a nutshell, you know what I think about the academic mind?"

"I am not interested."

"In a nutshell, it's — nuts."

McKenzie went off into a crude guffaw, while Chao looked after him with distaste. The man had a most vulgar sense of humor.

Chao did not let himself be too greatly disturbed. He had observed McKenzie's use of the analyzer, and he knew that it would not be difficult to operate the apparatus himself. Very well, he thought, while the so-called practical men are at a loss, I shall go ahead and contact the tiny creatures again. For above all, what is needed before we can come to an intelligent

decision about what offer to make is valid scientific information. And who is so proficient at the gathering of information as the man who has been academically trained?

Neither McKenzie nor Captain Gonzales was present when Chao made his attempt to contact the Raldo pair. For a time, as he had expected, there was no answer. Bursts of radiation there were, but in a code he did not know. Finally there came from the analyzer a series of sounds that made sense.

"What do you want of us?"

Another burst interrupted. "Quiet, Two! I ordered you not to make a reply!"

Chao smiled quietly to himself. This was what he had counted on. He was in contact with at least two of the creatures, and as he had noted before, there was antagonism between them. If he stimulated it skillfully, information should not be too slow in coming.

"Your orders," said Raldo II, "no longer mean anything to me, One. What do you want, Outer World?"

"To discuss with you affairs that may redound to our mutual benefit."

"We hold no discussions with our enemies," put in Raldo I.

"But we are not enemies. Personally I find you endos to be most interesting creatures — I should say, individuals — well worth the courteous attention of other intelligent minds. It is true that some of the more stupid members of our group may wish to exterminate your race. But there are undoubtedly good reasons for letting you live, and I seek to find them."

"We are not dependent upon your good will," said Raldo I. "Do your worst against us, we shall survive. And strike back."

"Let us not be hasty, One. Remember that their size gives them an advantage."

"I have told you before, Two — do not interrupt! You are alive only by my sufferance, and I shall change my mind about you if you interfere."

"It will do you no good to change your mind," observed Raldo II coldly. "I fed as well as you at our storehouse, and I have conserved my energy. I am at least as powerful as you are."

"You ungrateful wretch, I should never have trusted you!" raged Raldo I.

"Either that, or you should have trusted me more. Your trouble, One, is that you are too stupid to trust anyone. All you can think of is that there is food enough for only one endo per world. Well, perhaps that has been the tradition in the past, but no tradition lasts forever. The three Penkos manage to get along together, and so do many other endo groups. And I see no reason why we cannot get along with these strange worlds. If

they have been willing to take the trouble to learn our language, it is obvious that their intentions are not necessarily hostile."

"You are most perceptive, my friend Two," said Chao, getting into the conversation again. "We should indeed like to be friendly. But I see that there is considerable reluctance to overcome, on both sides. That is why I require information. We know how to help you. But in what way can you help us?"

A pause. Chao waited patiently for the answer.

"We cannot help you," said Raldo I at last. "We have no desire to do so."

"We do have the desire," demurred Raldo II. "It is to our interest to have the desire. Just as it is to our interest to cooperate in this world of ours."

"It is in *your* interest," replied Raldo I sourly. "It puts off your suicide."

"Interesting," thought Chao. "As I so shrewdly realized, they don't see quite eye to eye, or feeler to feeler, or however they do see. And this Two is decidedly more intelligent than his fellow."

"You are stupid, One," said Raldo II. "Among endos you are preeminent for your stupidity. How do you think my suicide would help you? Or yours help me? If one of us were to get rid of the other, how do you suppose we could possibly manage our world? We need one endo at the screen to see what is going on, and at least one at the brain. Two at the brain would be still better. And if there were an additional endo to relieve whichever of the others first needed food, there wouldn't be this continual danger of starvation while at our posts. Remember what a sad fix we were in before we found food in those invading parasites, and split? That wouldn't happen again."

"He is thinking out the advantages of cooperation," thought Chao in amazement. "Considering the situation he faces, the tiny creature is a genius."

"But there isn't enough food —" began Raldo I.

"If we could control our world's movements better, there would be plenty of food. We could guide it to food. It would be easier for our world to feed four than it now is to feed one."

Raldo I was silent. He might be a little too greatly influenced by tradition, and by a silly desire to stick up for what he felt were his own rights, but he was no fool. He was thinking things over.

Chao broke in. "What you say, Raldo II, is in agreement with the lessons we have learned from our own history. Where once on our native planet only a few hundred thousand might inhabit a great continent, we learned by cooperation to support billions. For one thing, it is not necessary merely to learn better ways of *finding* food. It is possible to *grow* plants that will serve as food."

"Ah, you hear that, One?"

"We could help you there. We would divide this planet between us. We would see to it that the plants you needed grew only in the areas where the uranium ores were concentrated, and we'd take care that your worlds didn't spread the uranium they absorbed any further over the rest of the planet, where we lived. Your beast worlds wouldn't lose, either. More of them would be able to live per square mile than now live over a thousand times that."

"And for every world there would be many endos. You hear that, One?"

"I hear." There was a moment of silence, while Raldo I thought. "It sounds good," he finally said grudgingly.

"We have much to gain. The question remains, what do these outer worlds have to gain from us? How can we benefit them so that they remain willing to help us?"

"May I ask a question?" said Chao. "Your relations with the creatures — the worlds — you inhabit would seem to us, offhand, to be parasitic. You live at their expense, do you not?"

"That is not so," replied Raldo II. "They serve us, but we serve them also."

"Ah, that is what I wanted to know. So the true description of the relationship is not parasitism, but symbiosis. You live together for mutual advantages. I should be most grateful if you could list them for me."

"That is simple," said Raldo II promptly. "Firstly, we protect our hosts from invasion by harmful endos." That "firstly" won Chao's heart. "Only a short time ago," went on Two, "we destroyed an army of small invaders from outer space."

"So that's what happened to those parasites with which I tried to infect the large beasts," thought Chao.

"We also detect the growth of dangerous tissue," continued Raldo II, "and destroy it before it becomes too large. We promote the growth of healthy tissue where there has been accidental destruction, and we also stimulate the metabolism of the entire organism when it is too low."

"You play a most useful role indeed," said Chao slowly. Then he paused. A most obvious and at the same time most remarkable thought had come to him, a thought so natural and yet so daring that he hesitated to give it voice. But the memory of McKenzie impelled him on. The academic mind was timid, was it, the academic mind was afraid of its own conclusions? Full speed ahead, Academic Mind, damn the torpedoes and let the chips fall where they may. "Perhaps," he said at last, "you might be willing to live in symbiosis with our own race in the same way."

There was a pause, as of astonishment. The idea is too daring for them,

thought Chao complacently. Just as it will be too daring for McKenzie, when I tell him. The timidity of the academic mind indeed!

"We are adapted to our present worlds," said Raldo II slowly. "But our ancestors were free-floating, and we still possess the ability to live in strange surroundings for short periods of time. Yes, I think we might do for other worlds what we do for our present ones. Perhaps we could even adapt permanently to such hosts as you."

"It would be a nuisance," broke in Raldo I. "Why should we adapt?"

"For our own benefit, One. And for theirs too — if we can conquer the problem of radioactivity. These worlds are susceptible to the rays we emit."

"I have been concerned about that," admitted Chao. "But I was hoping that you could control your radiation."

"Why should we go to the trouble?" demanded Raldo I.

"It is trouble, I agree," said Raldo II. "But it may be worth the endeavor. In order to curtail our radioactivity, we must make a transition for long periods to a third, nonmotile form, in which we are semidormant, and rely upon chemical energy alone. There is a sharp decrease in the emission of neutrons, neutrinos, and radionucleoli, and the disintegration rate is reduced to a small fraction of the normal. It is not a form which we adopt willingly."

Chao had heard of neutrons and neutrinos, of course, but not of radionucleoli. The use of the new term pleased him. Even from the scientific point of view, he thought, they have things to teach us. If he could only supply the final argument to convince them —

"Our numbers are far greater than those of your present hosts," he said. "If you could really adapt to us, you would be able to multiply tremendously." And then he added the clincher: "Moreover, there would be no need for any one of a group of endos to commit suicide for lack of food."

"No suicide? You hear that, One? No suicide for any of us! That is decisive," said Raldo II. "I am convinced."

"Very well. I shall report to my own kind."

It was with considerable trepidation that Chao told Captain Gonzales and McKenzie about his great discovery. McKenzie at first stared at him as if he were mad. "Carry one of those things around in my body?" he said. "Not on your life."

"No one is asking you to entertain an endo in your worthless carcass," said Chao. "I shall have the honor of experimenting on myself first — if you can call it an experiment. I do not think there is actually any danger."

"I don't want any parasites crawling through me!"

"Hold it, McKenzie," said Gonzales. "You don't get the full picture. Put one of those endos in your body, and you'll get personal treatment for

whatever ails you. No guessing at diagnosis or medication with one of those little experts around. They'll get to the source of the trouble every time."

"Exactly, Captain Gonzales. Also," said Chao, "there is another advantage. Can you imagine the pleasure of conversing with an intelligent symbiote like Raldo II? In the future, no human being need ever be lonely, even though he is alone."

"Who's lonely?" demanded McKenzie. "When I want company, I know where to find it. I got red blood in me. I don't need parasites."

Just as he had anticipated, thought Chao happily, the man had a closed mind. He said, "There is another way in which the endos can be useful. A possibility you have overlooked in your own field. Can you imagine what you could achieve with a tiny broadcaster, an electron filter, a transistor — any electronic gadget that was *alive*? You would do and learn things never before possible."

"Say, that's an idea," said McKenzie.

"Of course it is. That's why it hasn't occurred to you. Do you know, McKenzie, my opinion of a nonacademic mind such as yours? In a nutshell, as the vulgar would say, it is — nuts."

Gonzales grinned. "Never mind the squabbling," he said. "You've made your point, Chao. Let's get in touch with these endos."

A few moments later he was telling the Raldo pair, "We accept your offer of symbiosis. Will you communicate with the others of your kind and let them know?"

"We have tried to send," said Raldo II. "But we receive no answer."

"We'll remove the shielding screen," said Gonzales. "We'll have to wear leaded suits when we approach you, but meanwhile you'll be able to communicate with your friends."

He turned to the others. "That's that," he said, and sighed happily. "Problem solved."

"Maybe," said McKenzie, "the other parasites won't agree."

"Don't be a pessimist, McKenzie. They're already tending toward cooperation, and they're too intelligent not to see a good thing when it's offered to them. Even Raldo I agrees, and he's apparently one of the last of the rugged individualists. They'll come in with us all right. And you know — I think we're going to get more out of the deal than they are."

As for Raldo I and Raldo II, they looked at it somewhat differently. They were going to leave the old world in which they had been born and go venturing into brave new ones. And then perhaps there would be the conquest of outer space —

Theirs were the greater benefits. Obviously.

In SYNDIC, that wonderfully entertaining recent novel of a future world ruled by a benevolent despotism of gangsters, C. M. Kornbluth gave the professional criminal, for the first time, his rightful place in science fiction. Now Mr. Kornbluth takes another criminal pro, younger and less exalted than the lords of the Syndicate but no less shrewdly practical, and confronts him, not with the science of the future, but with the witchcraft of today and all the ages past. Result: an uninhibited and uproarious story in the best tradition of madly logical fantasy.

I Never Ast No Favors

by C. M. KORNBLUTH

Dear Mr. Marino:

I hesitate to take pen in hand and write you because I guess you do not remember me except maybe as a punk kid you did a good turn, and I know you must be a busy man running your undertaking parlor as well as the Third Ward and your barber shop. I never ast no favors of nobody but this is a special case which I hope you will agree when I explain.

To refresh your memory as the mouthpiece says in court, my name is Anthony Cornaro only maybe you remember me better as Tough Tony, which is what they call me back home in the Ward. I am not the Tough Tony from Water Street who is about 55 and doing a sixer up the river, I am the Tough Tony who is going on seventeen from Brecker Street and who you got probation for last week after I slash that nosy cop that comes flatfooting into the grocery store where some friends and I are just looking around not knowing it is after hours and that the grocery man has went home. That is the Tough Tony that I am. I guess you remember me now so I can go ahead.

With the probation, not that I am complaining, the trouble starts. The mouthpiece says he has known this lad for years and he comes from a very fine churchgoing family and he has been led astray by bad companions. So all right, the judge says three years probation, but he goes on to say *if*. If this, if that, environment, bad influences, congested city streets, our vital dairy industry denuded — such a word from a judge! — of labor . . .

Before I know what has happened, I am signing a paper, my Mama is putting her mark on it and I am on my way to Chiunga County to milk cows.

I figure the judge does not know I am a personal friend of yours and I do not want to embarrass you by mentioning your name in open court, I figure I will get a chance later to straighten things out. Also, to tell you the truth, I am too struck with horror to talk.

On the ride upstate I am handcuffed to the juvenile court officer so I cannot make a break for it, but at last I get time to think and I realize that it is not as bad as it looks. I am supposed to work for a dame named Mrs. Parry and get chow, clothes and Prevailing Wages. I figure it takes maybe a month for her to break me in on the cow racket or even longer if I play dumb. During the month I get a few bucks, a set of threads and take it easy and by then I figure you will have everything straightened out and I can get back to my regular occupation, only more careful this time. Experience is the best teacher, Mr. Marino, as I am sure you know.

Well, we arrive at this town Chiunga Forks and I swear to God I never saw such a creepy place. You wouldn't believe it. The main drag is all of four blocks long and the stores and houses are from wood. I expect to see Gary Cooper stalking down the street with a scowl on his puss and his hands on his guns looking for the bad guys. Four hours from the Third Ward in a beat-up '48 police department Buick — you wouldn't believe it.

We park in front of a hash house, characters in rubber boots gawk at us, the court officer takes off the cuffs and gabs with the driver but does not lose sight of me. While we are waiting for this Mrs. Parry to keep the date I study the bank building across the street and develop some ideas which will interest you, Mr. Marino, but which I will not go into right now.

All of a sudden there is a hassle on the sidewalk.

A big woman with gray hair and a built like Tony Galento is kicking a little guy who looks like T.B. Louis the Book, who I guess you know, but not so muscular and wearing overalls. She is kicking him right in the keister, five-six times. Each time I shudder, and so maybe does the bank building across the street.

"Shoot my dawg, will you!" she yells at the character. "I said I'd kick your butt from here to Scranton when I caught up with you, Dud Wingle!"

"Leavè me be!" he squawks, trying to pry her hands off his shoulders. "He was chasin' deer! He was chasin' deer!"

Thud — thud — thud. "I don't keer if he was chasin' deer, panthers or butterflies." *Thud.* "He was my dawg and you shot him!" *Thud.* She was drawing quite a crowd. The characters in rubber boots are forgetting all about us to stare at her and him.

Up comes a flatfoot who I later learn is the entire manpower of Chiunga Forks' lousiest; he says to the big woman "Now Ella" a few times and she finally stops booting the little character and lets him go. "What do you want, Henry?" she growls at the flatfoot and he asks weakly: "Silver Bell dropped her calf yet?"

The little character is limping away rubbing himself. The big broad watches him regretfully and says to the flatfoot: "Yesterday, Henry. Now if you'll excuse me I have to look for my new hired boy from the city. I guess that's him over there."

She strolls over to us and yanks open the Buick's door, almost taking it off the hinges. "I'm Mrs. Ella Parry," she says to me, sticking out her hand. "You must be the Cornaro boy the Probation Association people wired me about."

I shake hands and say, "Yes, ma'am."

The officer turns me over grinning like a skunk eating beans.

I figure Mrs. Parry lives in one of the wood houses in Chiunga Forks, but no. We climb into a this-year Willys truck and take off for the hills. I do not have much to say to this lady wrestler but wish I had somebody smuggle me a rod to kind of even things a little between her and me. With that built she could break me in half by accident. I try to get in good with her by offering to customize her truck. "I could strip off the bumper guards and put on a couple of fog lights, maybe new fender skirts with a little trim to them," I say, "and it wouldn't cost you a dime. Even out here there has got to be some parts place where a person can heist what he needs."

"Quiet, Bub," she says all of a sudden, and shields her eyes peering down a side road where a car is standing in front of a shack. "I swear," she says, "that looks like Dud Wingle's Ford in front of Miz' Sigafoos' place." She keeps her neck twisting around to study it until it is out of sight. And she looks worried.

I figure it is not a good time to talk and anyway maybe she has notions about customizing and does not approve of it.

"What," she says, "would Dud Wingle want with Miz' Sigafoos?"

"I don't know, ma'am," I say. "Wasn't he the gentleman you was kicking from here to Scranton?"

"Shucks, Bub, that was just a figger of speech. If I'd of wanted to kick him from here to Scranton I'd of *done* it. Dud and Jim and Ab and Sime think they got a right to shoot your dog if he chases the deer. I'm a peaceable woman or I'd have the law on them for shootin' Grip. But maybe I did kind of lose my temper." She looked worrieder yet.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" I ask. You never can tell, but a lot of old dames talk to me like I was their uncle; to tell you the truth, this is my biggest problem in a cat house. It must be because I am a kind of thoughtful guy and it shows.

Mrs. Parry is no exception. She says to me: "You don't know the folks up here yet, Bub, so you don't know about Miz' Sigafoos. I'm old English stock so I don't hold with their foolishness, but —" And here she looked *real* worried. "Miz' Sigafoos is what they call a hex doctor."

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Just a lot of foolishness. Don't you pay any attention," she says, and then she has to concentrate on the driving. We are turning off the two-lane state highway and going up, up, up, into the hills, off a blacktop road, off a gravel road, off a dirt road. No people. No houses. Fences and cows or maybe horses, I can't tell for sure. Finally we are at her place, which is from wood and in two buildings. I start automatically for the building that is clean, new-painted, big and expensive.

"Hold on, Bub," she says. "No need to head for the barn first thing. Let's get you settled in the house first and then there'll be a plenty of work for you."

I do a double take and see that the big, clean, expensive building is the barn. The little, cheap, run-down place is the house. I say to myself: "Tough Tony, you're gonna pray tonight that Mr. Marino don't forget to tell the judge you're a personal friend of his and get you out of this."

But that night I do not pray. I am too tired. After throwing sacks of scratch feed and laying mash around, I run the baling machine and I turn the oats in the loft and I pump water until my back is aching jello and then I go hiking out to the woodlot and chop down trees and cut them up with a chain saw. It is surprising how fast I learn and how willing I am when I remember what Mrs. Parry did to Dud Wingle.

I barely get to sleep it seems like when Mrs. Parry is yanking the covers off me laughing and I see through the window that the sky is getting a little light. "Time to rise, Bub," she bawls. "Breakfast on the table." She strides to the window and flexes her muscles, breathing deep. "It's going to be a fine day. I can tell when an animal's sick to death and I can tell when it's going to be fine all day. Rise and shine, Bub. We have a lot of work ahead. I was kind of easy on you yesterday seeing you was new here, so we got a bit behindhand."

I eye the bulging muscles and say "Yes, ma'am."

She serves a good breakfast, I have to admit. Usually I just have some

coffee around eleven when I wake up and maybe a meat-ball sandwich around four, but the country air gives you an appetite like I always heard. Maybe I didn't tell you there was just the two of us. Her husband kicked off a couple years ago. She gave one of her boys half the farm because she says she don't believe in letting them hang around without a chance to make some money and get married until you die. The other boy, nineteen, got drafted two months ago and since then she is running the place on her own hook because for some reason or other it is hard to get people to work on a farm. She says she does not understand this and I do not enlighten her.

First thing after breakfast she tells me to make four crates from lumber in the toolshed, go to the duckpond and put the four Muscovy ducks in the crates so she can take them to town and sell them. She has been meaning to sell the Muscovy ducks for some time since the word has been getting around that she was pro-communist for having such a breed of ducks when there were plenty of good American ducks she could of raised. "Though," she says, "in my opinion the Walterses ought to sell off their Peking ducks too because the Chinese are just as bad as the Roossians."

I make the crates which is easy and I go to the duckpond. There are four ducks there but they are not swimming; they have sunk. I go and tell Mrs. Parry and she looks at me like I was crazy.

"Yeah," I tell her. "Sunk. Down at the bottom of the pond, drowned. I guess maybe during the night they forgot to keep treading water or something."

She didn't say a word. She just strides down the path to the duckpond and looks into it and sees the four ducks. They are big, horrible things with kind of red Jimmy Valentine masks over their eyes, and they are lying at the bottom of the pond. She wades in, still without a word, and fishes them out. She gets a big shiv out of her apron pocket, slits the ducks open, yanks out their lungs and slits them open. Water dribbles out.

"Drowned," she mutters. "If there was snapping turtles to drag them under . . . but there ain't."

I do not understand what the fuss is about and ast her if she can't sell them anyway. She says no, it wouldn't be honest, and I should get a shovel and bury them. Then there is an awful belling from the cow barn. "Agnes of Lincolnshire!" Mrs. Parry squawks and dashes for the barn. "She's dropping her calf ahead of time!"

I run along beside her. "Should I call the cops?" I pant. "They always get to the place before the ambulance and you don't have to pay them nothing. My married sister had three kids delivered by the cops —"

But it seems it's different with cows and anyway they have a different

kind of flatfoot out here that didn't go to Police Academy. Mrs. Parry finally looks up from the calf and says "I think I saved it. I *know* I saved it. I can tell when an animal's dying. Bub, go to the phone and call Miz' Croley and ask her if she can possibly spare Brenda to come over and do the milkin' tonight and tomorrow morning. I dassn't leave Agnes and the calf; they need nursing."

I stagger out of the cowbarn, throw up two-three times and go to the phone in the house. I seen them phones with flywheels in the movies so I know how to work it. Mrs. Croley cusses and moans and then says all right she'll send Brenda over in the Ford and please to tell Mrs. Parry not to keep her no longer than she has to because she has a herd of her own that needs milking.

I tell Mrs. Parry in the barn and Mrs. Parry snaps that Mrs. Croley has a living husband and a draft-proof farmhand and she swore she didn't know what things were coming to when a neighbor wouldn't help another neighbor out.

I ast casually: "Who is this Brenda, ma'am?"

"Miz' Croley's daughter. Good for nothing."

I don't ast no more questions but I sure begin to wait with interest for a Ford to round the bend of the road.

It does while I am bucking up logs with the chainsaw. Brenda is a blondie about my age, a little too big for her dress—an effect which I always go for; whether in the Third Ward or Chiunga County. I don't have a chance to talk to her until lunch, and then all she does is giggle. But who wants conversation? I make a mental note that she will have the room next to mine and then a truck comes snorting up the driveway. Something inside the truck is snorting louder than the truck.

Mrs. Parry throws up her hands. "Land, I forgot! Belshazzar the Magnificent for Princess Leilani!" She gulps coffee and dashes out.

"Brenda," I say, "what was that all about?"

She giggles and this time blushes. I throw down my napkin and go to the window. The truck is being backed to a field with a big board fence around it. Mrs. Parry is going into the barn and is leading a cow into the field. The cow is mighty nervous and I begin to understand why. The truckdriver opens the tailgate and out comes a snorting bull.

I think: well, I been to a few stag shows but *this* I never seen before. Maybe a person can learn something in the country after all.

Belshazzar the Magnificent sees Princess Leilani. He snorts like Charles Boyer. Princess Leilani cowers away from him like Betté Davis. Belshazzar the Magnificent paws the ground. Princess Leilani trembles. And then Belshazzar the Magnificent yawns and starts eating grass.

Princess Leilani looks up, startled and says: "Huh?" No, on second thought it is not Princess Leilani who says "Huh?" It is Brenda, at the other kitchen window. She sees me watching her, giggles, blushes and goes to the sink and starts doing dishes.

I guess this is a good sign, but I don't press my luck. I go outside, where Mrs. Parry is cussing out the truckdriver. "Some bull!" she yells at him. "What am I supposed to do now? How long is Leilani going to stay in season? What if I can't line up another stud for her? Do you realize what it's going to cost me in veal and milk checks—" Yatata, yatata, yatata, while the truckdriver keeps trying to butt in with excuses and Belshazzar the Magnificent eats grass and sometimes gives Princess Leilani a brotherly lick on the nose, for by that time Princess Leilani has dropped the nervous act and edged over mooing plaintively.

Mrs. Parry yells: "See that? I don't hold with artificial insemination but you dang stockbreeders are driving us dairy farmers to it! Get your — your *steer* off my property before I throw him off! I got work to do even if he hasn't! Belshazzar the Magnificent — *hah!*"

She turns on me. "Don't just stand around gawking, Bub. When you get the stovewood split you can stack it in the woodshed." I scurry off and resume Operation Woodlot, but I take it a little easy which I can do because Mrs. Parry is in the cowbarn nursing Agnes of Lincolnshire and the premie calf.

At supper Mrs. Parry says she thinks she better put a cot in the barn for herself and spend the night there with the invalids in case there is a sudden emergency. "And that don't mean," she adds, "that you children can be up half the night playing the radio just because the old lady ain't around. I want to see the house lights out by 8:30. Understand?"

"Yes ma'am," Brenda says.

"We won't play the radio, ma'am," I say. "And we'll put the lights out." Brenda giggled.

What happens that night is a little embarrassing to write about. I hope, Mr. Marino, you won't go telling it around. I figure that being a licensed mortician like you are as well as boss of the Third Ward you are practically like a doctor and doctors don't go around shooting their mouths off about what their patients tell them. I figure what I have to tell you about what happened comes under the sacred relationship between a doctor and patient or a hood and his mouthpiece.

Anyway, this is what happens: nothing happens.

Like with Belshazzar the Magnificent.

I go into her room, I say yes, she says no, I say yes *please*, she says well

okay. And then nothing happens. I never been so humiliated and I hope you will keep this confidential because it isn't the kind of thing you like to have get around. I am telling you about it only because I never ask no favors but this is a very special case and I want you to understand why.

The next morning at breakfast I am in a bad temper, Brenda has got the giggles and Mrs. Parry is stiff and tired from sleeping in the barn. We are a gruesome threesome, and then a car drives up and a kid of maybe thirty comes busting into the kitchen. He has been crying. His eyes are red and there are clean places on his face where the tears ran down. "Ma!" he whimpers at Mrs. Parry. "I got to talk to you! You got to talk to Bonita, she says I don't love her no more and she's going to leave me!"

"Hush up, George," she snaps at him. "Come into the parlor." They go into the parlor and Brenda whistles: "Whoo-ee! Wait'll I tell Maw about *this!*"

"Who is he?" I ask.

"Miz' Parry's boy George. She gave him the south half of the farm and built him a house on it. Bonita's his wife. She's a stuck-up girl from Ware County and she wears falsies and dyes her hair and—" Brenda looks around, lowers her voice and whispers "*— and she sends her worshipping to the laundry in town.*"

"God in Heaven," I say. "Have the cops heard about this?"

"Oh, it's *legal*, but you just shouldn't *do* it."

"I see. I misunderstood, I guess. Back in the Third Ward it's a worse rap than moperly with intent to gawk. The judges are ruthless with it."

Her eyes go round. "Is that a fact?"

"Sure. Tell your mother about it."

Mrs. Parry came back in with her son and said to us: "Clear out, you kids. I want to make a phone call."

"I'll start the milkin'," Brenda said.

"And I'll framble the portistan while it's still cool and barkney," I say.

"Sure," Mrs. Parry says, cranking the phone. "Go and do that, Bub." She is preoccupied.

I go through the kitchen door, take one sidestep, flatten against the house and listen. Reception is pretty good.

"Bonita?" Mrs. Parry says into the phone. "Is that you, Bonita? Listen, Bonita, George is here and he asked me to call you and tell you he's sorry. I ain't exactly going to say that. I'm going to say that you're acting like a blame fool . . . No, no, no. Don't talk about it. This is a party line. Just listen; I know what happened. George told me; after all, I'm his mother. Just listen to an older woman with more experience. So it happened.

That don't mean he doesn't love you, child! It's happened to me. I guess it's happened to every woman. You mustn't take it *personally*. You're just sufferin' from a case of newlywed nerves. After you've been married two years or so you'll see things like this in better focus. Maybe George was tired. Maybe he got one of these flu germs that's goin' around. . . . No, I didn't say he was sick. No, he seems all right — maybe looks a *little* feverish. . . . Well, now, I don't know whether you really want to talk to him or not, you being so upset and all. If he *is* sick it'd just upset him — oh, all right." She chuckles away from the phone and says: "She wants to talk to you, George. Don't be too eager, boy."

I slink away from the kitchen door thinking: "Ah-hah!" I am thinking so hard that Mrs. Parry bingles into me when she walks out of the kitchen sooner than I expect.

She grabs me with one of those pipe-vise hands and snaps: "You young devil, were you listening to me on the phone?"

Usually it is the smart thing to deny everything and ast for your mouth-piece, but up here they got no mouthpieces. For once I tell the truth and cop a plea. "Yes, Mrs. Parry. I'm so *ashamed* of myself you can't imagine. I always been like that. It's a psy-cho-logical twist I got for listening. I can't seem to control it. Maybe I read too many bad comic books. But honest I won't breath a word about how George couldn't—" Here I have the sense to shut up, but too late.

She drills me with a look and the pipe vise tightens on my arm. "Couldn't *what*, Bub?"

"Like Belshazzar the Magnificent," I say weakly.

"Yep," she says. "I thought that's what you were going to say. Now tell me, Bub — how'd you know? And don't tell me you guessed from what I said. I been using party lines for thirty years. The way I was talkin' to Bonita, it could've been anything from George hitting her with a brick to comin' home drunk. You picked a mighty long shot, you picked it right and I want to know how you did it."

She would of made a great D.A. I mumble: "The same thing happened to me last night. Would you mind lettin' go of my arm, Mrs. Parry? Before it drops off?"

She lets go with a start. "I'm sorry, Bub." She walked slowly to the barn and I walk slowly beside her because I think she expects it.

"Maybe," I say, "it's something in the water."

She shakes her head. "You don't know bulls, Bub. And what about the ducks that sank and Agnes dropping her calf before her time?" She begins to breathe hard through her nostrils. "It's hexin', that's what it is!"

"What's hexin', ma'am?"

"Heathen doings by that old Miz' Sigafoos. She's been warned and warned plenty to stick to her doctoring. I hold nothing against her for curing the croup or maybe selling a young man love potion if he's goin' down to Scranton to sell his crop and play around a little. But she's not satisfied with that, I guess. Dud Wingle must of gone to her with a twenty dollar bill to witch my farm!"

I do not know what to make of this. My mama of course has told me about *la vecchia religione*, but I never know they believe in stuff like that over here. "Can you go to the cops, ma'am?" I ask.

She snorts like Belshazzar the Magnificent. "Cops! A fat lot old Henry Bricker would know about witchin'. No, Bub, I guess I'll handle this myself. I ain't the five-times-great-granddaughter of Pru Posthlewaiite for nothin'!"

"Who was Pru — what you said?"

"Hanged in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1680 for witchcraft. Her coven name was Little Gaddy, but I guess she wasn't so little. The first two ropes broke — but we got no time to stand around talkin'. I got to find my Ma's trunk in the attic. You go get the black rooster from the chicken run. I wonder where there's some chalk?" And she walks off to the house, mumbling. I walk to the chicken run thinking she has flipped.

The black rooster is a tricky character, very fast on his feet and also I am new at the chicken racket. It takes me half an hour to stalk him down, during which time incidentally the Ford leaves with Brenda in it and George drives away in his car. See you later, Brenda, I think to myself and maybe you will be surprised.

I go to the kitchen door with the rooster screaming in my arms and Mrs. Parry says: "Come on in with him and set him anywhere." I do, Mrs. Parry scatters some cornflakes on the floor and the rooster calms down right away and stalks around picking it up. Mrs. Parry is sweaty and dust-covered and there are some dirty old papers rolled up on the kitchen table.

She starts fooling around on the floor with one of the papers and a hunk of carpenter's chalk and just to be doing something I look at the rest of them. Honest to God, you never saw such lousy spelling and handwriting. *Tayke the Duste off ane Olde Ymmage Quhich Ye Myngel* — like that.

I shake my head and think: it's the cow racket. No normal human can take this life. She has flipped and I don't blame her, but it will be a horrible thing if she becomes homicidal. I look around for a poker or something and start to edge away. I am thinking of a dash from the door to the Willys and then scorching into town to come back with the men in the little white coats.

She looks up at me and says: "Don't go away, Bub. This is woman's work, but I need somebody to hold the sword and palm and you're the onliest one around." She grins. "I guess you never saw anything like *this* in the city, hey?"

"No, ma'am," I say, and notice that my voice is very faint.

"Well, don't let it skeer you. There's some people it'd skeer, but the Probation Association people say they call you Tough Tony, so I guess you won't take fright."

"No, ma'am."

"Now what do we do for a sword? I guess this bread knife'll — no; the ham slicer. It looks *more* like a sword. Hold it in your left hand and get a couple of them gilded bulrushes from the vase in the parlor. Mind you wipe your feet before you tread on the carpet! And then come back. Make it fast."

She starts to copy some stuff that looks like Yiddish writing onto the floor and I go into the parlor. I am about to tiptoe to the front door when she yells: "Bub! That you?"

Maybe I could beat her in a race for the car, maybe not. I shrug. At least I have a knife — and know how to use it. I bring her the gilded things from the vase. Ugh! While I am out she has cut the head off the rooster and is sprinkling its blood over a big chalk star and the writing on the floor. But the knife makes me feel more confident even though I begin to worry about how it will look if I have to do anything with it. I am figuring that maybe I can hamstring her if she takes off after me, and meanwhile I should humor her because maybe she will snap out of it.

"Bub," she says, "hold the sword and palms in front of you pointing up and don't step inside the chalk lines. Now, will you promise me not to tell anybody about the words I speak? The rest of this stuff don't matter;

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it's down in all the books and people have their minds made up that it don't work. But about the words, do you promise?"

"Yes, ma'am. Anything you say, ma'am."

So she starts talking and the promise was not necessary because it's in some foreign language and I don't talk foreign languages except sometimes a little Italian to my mama. I am beginning to yawn when I notice that we have company.

He is eight feet tall, he is green, he has teeth like Red Riding Hood's grandma.

I dive through the window, screaming.

When Mrs. Parry comes out she finds me in a pile of broken glass, on my knees, praying. She clamps two fingers on my ear and hoists me to my feet. "Stop that praying," she says. "He's complaining about it. Says it makes him itch. And you said you wouldn't be skeered! Now come inside where I can keep an eye on you and behave yourself. The ideal! The very ideal!"

To tell you the truth, I don't remember what happens after this so good. There is some talk between the green character and Mrs. Parry about her five-times-great-grandmother who it seems is doing nicely in a warm climate. There is an argument in which the green character gets shifty and says he doesn't know who is working for Miz' Sigafoos these days. Miz' Parry threatens to let me pray again and the green character gets sulky and says all right he'll send for him and rattle with him but he is sure he can lick him.

The next thing I recall is a grunt-and-groan exhibition between the green character and a smaller purple character who must of arrived when I was blacked out or something. This at least I know something about because I am a television fan. It is a very slow match, because when one of the characters for instance bends the other character's arm it just bends

Note:

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and does not break. But a good big character can lick a good little character every time and finally greenface has got his opponent tied into a bowknot.

"Be gone," Mrs. Parry says to the purple character, "and never more molest me or mine. Be gone, be gone, be gone."

He is gone, and I never do find out if he gets unknotted.

"Now fetch me Miz' Sigafos."

Blip! An ugly little old woman is sharing the ring with the winner and new champeen. She spits at Mrs. Parry: "So you it was dot mine Teufel haff ge-schtolen!" Her English is terrible. A greenhorn.

"This ain't a social call, Miz' Sigafos," Mrs. Parry says coldly. "I just want you to unwitch my farm and kinfolks. And if you're an honest woman you'll return his money to that sneakin', dog-murderin' shiftless squirt Dud Wingle."

"Yah," the old woman mumbles. She reaches up and feels the biceps of the green character. "Yah, I guess maybe dot I besser do. Who der Yunger iss?" She is looking at me. "For why the teeth on his mouth go clop-clop-clop? Und so white the face on his head iss! You besser should feed him, Ella."

"Missus Parry to you, Miz' Sigafos, if you don't mind. Now the both of you be gone, be gone, be gone."

At last we are alone.

"Now," Mrs. Parry grunts, "maybe we can get back to farmin'. Such foolishness and me a busy woman." She looks at me closely and says: "I do believe the old fool was right. You're as white as a sheet." She feels my forehead. "Oh, shoot! You do have a temperature. You better get to bed. If you ain't better in the morning I'll call Doc Hines."

So I am in the bedroom writing this letter, Mr. Marino, and I hope you will help me out. Like I said I never ast no favors but this is special.

Mr. Marino, will you please, please go to the judge and tell him I have a change of heart and don't want no probation? Tell him I want to pay my debt to society. Tell him I want to go to jail for three years, and for them to come and get me right away.

Sincerely,

Anthony (Tough Tony) Cornaro

P.S. On my way to get a stamp for this I notice that I have some gray hairs which is very unusual for a person going on seventeen. Please tell the judge I wouldn't mind if they give me solitary confinement and that maybe it would help me pay my debt to society.

In haste,

T.T.

Here Mr. Reynolds, in an unwontedly serious vein, presents a deceptive tale, one with such a wholly unexpected twist, that we can only say it's about a very odd sort of man and his even odder dog.

And Thou Beside Me

by MACK REYNOLDS

MARTIN WENDLE left his Jaguar sedan at the bottom of the hill and made his way by foot to the cottage at the crest. Halfway, he paused and considered. This was a small affair to a man of his dreams, his horizons. Or was it? Why had he expended so much time? His shrug was a very human shrug and his smile was wry. He continued his climb.

At the door his easy knock brought almost immediate response.

He said, "Is the professor in?"

The other hesitated. "You have an appointment, sir?"

Martin Wendle looked at him. "Please answer my question."

The servant wilted. "Professor Dreistein is in his study, sir."

Wendle handed him his hat and cane. "Thank you," he said.

He stood in the entrance of the mathematician's retreat and surveyed the room before making known his presence. It was a scholar's room, and a man's. The furniture was comfortable, meant to be sprawled upon, to bear the scuffing of shoes, the burns of cigarettes. There was a small portable bar in one corner, more than one humidor of tobacco, more than one rack of pipes. There were several works on the wall; Wendle made out a Rivera, a Grant Wood, a Hartley, a Bellows, a Marin.

In a heavy leather chair near the fire Hans Dreistein was crumpled, his celebrated shock of white hair and a section of his abnormally high forehead alone showing above his book. On the rug before him, head on paws, was a monstrous, black dog, breed unique.

The dog opened his eyes and softly voiced his protest.

Martin Wendle said, "Professor Dreistein?"

The scientist peered over the top of the volume, took in the man before him. The tall figure, the Lincoln-esque face, the immaculate clothing, the air of almost arrogant command.

Hans Dreistein marked his place with a forefinger, sat up and frowned. He began, "I gave orders to Wilson. . . ."

Martin Wendle said, "This is important beyond the allowing of a nonentity to interfere. It is necessary that I spend half an hour with you."

The dog growled again.

Hans Dreistein said, "That will be all, boy. Quiet, boy." He said to his visitor, "My schedule is a full one, sir. This retreat is my sole opportunity to escape for relaxation, for recuperation from an old man's ills, sometimes for protracted study and research."

The tall visitor found himself a chair opposite the old man. "My time is as valuable as your own. I have no intention of wasting it." His eyes took in the dog. He nodded, then brought them back to his unwilling host. "You are familiar with the life of Roger Bacon, the English philosopher and monk?"

The scholar sighed, turned down an edge of his book and placed it on the coffee table before him. He closed his eyes and said, "Born in 1215 and died at about the age of 80. Educated at Oxford and Paris and received an LL.D. degree. Entered the Franciscan order and settled at Oxford where he specialized in alchemy and optics. In those days he should have kept more of his business to himself. In 1257 they tried him for witchcraft and he spent ten years of an otherwise full life in prison."

Hans Dreistein's voice was frail with his age but still held its famed edge of humor. "A most interesting person," he finished. "But what has the old philosopher to do with this invasion of my privacy, Mr. —?"

His visitor said, "Martin Wendle. It will undoubtedly interest you to know that Bacon was a mutant. One of the first *homo superior* of whom we have a record."

Shaggy white eyebrows went up. "How unfortunate that he took his vows."

There was a distant snapping in Wendle's voice. "Very unfortunate, Professor. I am not dealing in nonsense, sir, as you shall find."

The mathematician took him in for a long moment, finally got to his feet and made his way to the portable bar. "A drink, Mr. Wendle?"

"Thank you, no."

As he mixed one for himself, the professor said, "I have found that contrary to popular belief, alcohol, ah, in correct dosage, can be quite helpful to the student of science."

"I have not found it so."

"Indeed." Professor Dreistein returned to his chair. The dog's eyes had followed him from chair to bar, to chair again. "Now then, sir. This half hour of my time you desire?"

The gaunt face relaxed infinitesimally as the other leaned back. "I have never told this story before," Wendle said. "Although, off and on, I have spent a good many years in its acquiring."

The professor sipped his drink. "I have always been fond of the Bacon story, legend — and myth."

"The story but starts with Bacon. You know, of course, that he spent considerable years of his life in seeking the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life."

"He shared the fallacies of the other alchemists of his time."

Martin Wendle shook his head. "You misunderstand. Roger Bacon dealt with no will-o'-the-wisps."

The professor sipped his drink again and his eyes sparkled. "I had forgotten that you told me he was a *homo superior*. So, let us say he discovered his elixir of life, his philosopher's stone."

Wendle snapped, "Professor, you would not deny the possibility of achieving today those two goals of the alchemists of yesteryear — everlasting life and transmutation of metals."

The professor grinned suddenly. "Touché!" he said. "However, that was 700 years ago, my friend."

"And Bacon was *homo superior*, and if this interruption continues I shall need even more than half an hour of your time." The professor remained smilingly silent at that, and Wendle went on. "To my knowledge, Bacon never developed transmutation of metals, and, indeed, was possibly never aware that he had succeeded in conquering death. You see, he was imprisoned before his experiments were completed. On his release, his spirit had been broken to the point that he never reached his former heights again."

The professor was interested in spite of himself. This at least was new, and the professor's clay was old but his mind was young.

Martin Wendle said, "I'll have to go off on a side road now. Have you ever wondered, Professor, what would occur were a chimpanzee to be given the life span of a human?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"Consider the fact that a human is not mature, not capable of making its own way, until it reaches the age of approximately fourteen. An age when most of our fellow mammals have matured, grown senile and died. But have you noticed how much further advanced is the chimpanzee than the human at the age of two to four?"

"That is well known," the professor admitted. He couldn't connect the point to the former subject.

"Long before the human child has put aside his toys, the chimp has completed his whole life cycle. But suppose we were to give him the span of a

human? Suppose we were to grant him an intellectual growth period of 40 or 50 years?"

"I see," the professor said. "You contend Bacon injected a chimpanzee with his elixir and —"

Wendle was shaking his long, angular head. "No. I was but using that as a handy example, since the chimp's ability is so universally recognized. Bacon used his dog, Devil — the animal himself — a result of experiments in mutation — for his tests."

Again the professor was interested. "And protracted his life for as long as that of a human?"

The other said softly, "Far more than that, Professor. Bacon awarded his pet eternal life."

The shaggy eyebrows rose again.

Wendle ignored the skepticism this time and pursued his course. "We must take still another tack. Consider, Professor; man and the dog. Down through the ages, from the most primitive of times. From the caves, Professor, it has always been man and dog. In terms of species, a symbiotic relationship."

Professor Dreistein let a hand drop to fondle the face of the ugly black brute on the rug before him.

Wendle said, "But suppose, Professor, that man's age-old friend, the dog, was able to develop his intelligence to the point where he could analyze, then — of course — criticize his partner through the millennia. How do you think man would stand up to the analysis of such a dog?"

The professor's wry smile was back again. "You know," he said, "I am glad you came. This is pleasant. I think I shall have another drink. This is restful, still stimulating."

He came to his feet and made his way to the bar. "Are you sure you won't join me?"

"Quite sure." The other went on with his point. "Such a dog would soon find his master wanting. Picture the animal. Possibly his I.Q. might not equal that of humanity — I am not sure — but as seven centuries went by his *accumulated* knowledge would surpass that of any man who had ever lived."

Hans Dreistein returned to his chair with his fresh drink. "And you feel that this hypothetical ah, *canis superior*, shall we say would find man wanting, eh?"

"Could there be any doubt? Can't you see his progressive development as the centuries unfolded? First, hurt surprise; then, disgust, scorn. And then? Then the realization of the need to overthrow this most arrogant, most cruelly destructive of Earth's creatures."

The professor kept himself from choking on his drink. "Revolution!" he laughingly sputtered.

"Exactly!" Wendle was not amused.

"Then why hasn't it been accomplished by this dog of Bacon's — what was his name, again?"

"Devil."

"Why hasn't Devil accomplished his revolution?"

Martin Wendle's ugly face was thoughtful, his eyes far away. "I am not sure, but I am of the opinion that he has two goals that must first be achieved."

"And they are —"

"First, he must rediscover some of Roger Bacon's achievements in induced mutation and the formula of the elixir so that he can inoculate still other animals, or, at least, still other dogs. Otherwise, following the revolution, as you call it, animal life would return to the jungle and but await a new master."

The professor was enthusiastic for the entertainment now. "And the second goal?" he prodded.

Wendle said, "The revolution must wait until man's other supreme gift from nature is antiquated." He leaned forward to make his point. "The hand is priceless in the early development of civilization. But when we have arrived at the point where even a paw can push the button or throw the switch that is necessary to put the most complicated of machinery to work, then indeed is man no longer necessary."

Professor Hans Dreistein's eyes were sparkling with the brandy and with the intellectual fun. "Capital!" he cried. "We have then this immortal Devil of Roger Bacon's, trying to rediscover the elixir of life, waiting the moment when man's industrial machine is so highly electronically developed that the paw can replace the hand."

Martin Wendle said soberly, "Not waiting, Professor, but stimulating man's progress to speed the day. I told you I had put many years into this. Leonardo and Galileo, among others in the past; more recently, Newton, Priestly, Faraday, Marconi — even Edison. I find evidence that he has lived in the homes of each in their turn."

"Oh, now please. This begins to become farce. I have a picture of this Devil of yours, whispering advice into the ear of —"

Martin Wendle said very slowly, "There would seem to be evidence of telepathic powers. Possibly quite unknown to his, ah, *masters*, Devil was able to direct their interests, their studies."

The professor put his glass down suddenly. He blinked at the other, the amusement gone from his eyes. He said finally, "The basis of my great-

est discoveries have been inspirational flashes that —" His eyes went from his visitor to the black dog lying on the rug. "But this is utter nonsense!"

The dog came erect, the hackles on his back rising. Into the minds of both of the men came the thought: *I am going to have to kill you. You realize that?*

The professor dropped into open-mouthed, shocked silence.

Martin Wendle shook his head. For the first time, Dreistein realized the infinite beauty and dignity in the sad ugliness of the Lincolnesque face. "No, Devil," he said. Then, "I've sought you a long time, you know."

The dog growled softly, and the thought came: *I am forced to kill you. How did you find out?*

Wendle said, "Remember your first master, Devil? Remember Roger Bacon?"

I shall never forget the master. He was not like other men.

"He was not a man, Devil. Look into my eyes."

The hackles went down. The head dropped an inch from its aggressive point. The eyes became softly questioning. The tip of the tail stirred.

Martin Wendle said, "I have sought you a long time, Devil. It is a long and hard and lonesome trail — the road to a better world. *Homo sapiens* needed his dog to help him go as far as he did; and *homo superior* will find the way easier side by side with *canis superior*. Come along, Devil."

Yes, master. We'll walk the road together.

As they reached the door, Devil turned and looked back over his heavy shoulder at the professor.

Never mind, Martin Wendle said telepathically. Neither he nor his servant will remember us in the morning.

Devil sighed deeply in contentment and trotted after, his tail flicking right, left, right, left.

Attention, All Readers!

WE WOULD like your advice. This is the first issue of this magazine to bring you only *new* stories. For the first time since we started publication we have used no reprints. Now, how about it? Shall we continue this "all new stories" policy? Or shall we resume reprinting in each issue one or two of our special finds? State your preference on a postcard — just write "all new" or "reprints" — and send it along. You be the judge!

That individually sharp bite with which Fritz Leiber has portrayed an all-too-foreseeable future in many stories, including last year's striking novel, THE GREEN MILLENNIUM, distinguishes this brief and bitter narrative of invasion and devastation, of violence and evil . . . and hope.

The Silence Game

by FRITZ LEIBER

LILI FELT really nervous when the American soldier popped his wide white face and liquid fuel gun through the sour smelling oak leaves and jammed a finger against his lips, just as if he knew the Game.

Perhaps it was not nice to feel nervous — oh, really amused — when she had just seen Chicago, or maybe Gary, go up over the oak trees in a big red poof, and when she had watched two soldiers' heads burst like balloons and splatter the scalloped leaves, and some of the Crowd made red lace by gas-propelled bullets. But if the Game did not work for war and horror as well as for dime and department stores, then what good was it anyway, and what good was she?

Of course when you got down to it, the hilariously nervous thing was that the soldier should warn her against talking when she had not said anything for two years. Some of the rest of the Crowd might have broken the rules of the Game, but she had not. If she had ever said a single word, it would have been like Vienna brought back to life and atomized again.

Bright grains of sand slowly slid between the gleaming barrel and magazine of the gun the soldier had slopped into the sand of the dune.

The slithering of the sand reminded Lili that things were going on. She yawned and lazily rippled her body a little, the sort of thing you always did to puzzle people when you were playing the Game. Then she looked steadily for the first time at the muzzle of the gun, no larger than the pupil of an eye contracted in bright light.

But that eye was not watching her, so she looked up at those of the soldier. She got a surprise. His face, that she had thought as comical as Harlequin's in a ballet, with finger pressed to mouth, was the most frightened thing she had ever seen. No, not frightened, but tortured by a fatal-

istic anxiety, as if he thought every moment might be the last in the world. Knots of jaw-muscle stood out under his ears. She supposed he had just climbed the other side of the dune, but he was breathing very carefully and slowly through tight-pleated lips. His head was bent forward a little, as if something were wrong with his neck. His eyes were firmly half-slitted, as if he dare not blink — as she watched, a diamond of sweat formed on a lash, but did not twinkle.

Why, he looked even more anxious than she had looked to herself ever since the 75th year of the Twentieth Century. Which was something extraordinary.

It really had been a crazy, nervous war this last half hour, after Chicago (or Gary) had bloomed so rosily with the miracle fertilizer of Russian H-bombs. Parachutes drifting down like fairy handkerchiefs that grew to blindingly white flying disks. Everybody yelling that the Russians were coming. But then soldiers in American khaki were shooting up the Crowd and only missing her because she was sunbathing in a bored way out in back. While two of the same soldiers had their heads inexplicably blown off while trying to talk to the Lotmanns on the next dune. Really nervous. The sort of thing that would have made her great-grandmother lift her high-arched eyebrows sadly — or Dr. Steiner smile, and shrug his shoulders.

But the anxiety in the soldier's face kept Lili looking at him. She almost started to speak — something that had not happened for months. But she controlled herself and instead climbed toward him with a smile.

He waved her off wildly. Sand from his hand peppered her face. She stopped ankle-deep in sand, continuing to smile, but wrinkling her forehead inquiringly. His waving instead of talking was like the Game again.

Dropping to his knees in the loose sand, the soldier dug furiously in his pockets and did not seem to find what he was looking for. Then he smoothed the sand in front of him and rapidly printed in letters and punctuation a foot high facing her, wiping each one out before printing the next:

DON'T SPEAK!

STAY AWAY!

SURGEON?

Lili looked at the soldier carefully. He did not seem wounded. Perhaps he had been gassed, or more likely caught under a germ bomb — that would explain his telling her to keep a distance. She fancied him breathing

out deadly little germ clouds. An image came to her of Dr. Steiner sitting motionless as a mummy on his dark porch above the sweep of sand, watching Lake Michigan. She believed Dr. Steiner would be sitting there now, unless crazy soldiers had killed him. It would surely take more than a war in his front yard to move Dr. Steiner.

The soldier softly let go the gun and lifted his hands toward her in taut questioning, his face contracted as if he were trying to squeeze his eyes out of his head. Lili nodded precisely, just as she did when a department store clerk had figured out from her gestures what she wanted. Then she held out her hand. But the soldier only flicked outspread fingers, knuckles upward, toward her, as if to say, "Lead." Lili nodded again, turned obediently, and started down the long curve of open dune that would finally take them to Dr. Steiner's cottage. The soldier picked up his weapon and followed, not moving freely like Lili, but with gingerly steps, as if he were fragile. A couple of dunes behind them a liquid fuel gun spoke softly, like a polite person clearing his throat. Far overhead, streamers of orange cloud were blowing in from the southwest, deepening the yellow of the sunlight. Lili's lips were set in a half smile, as was often the case when she was deep in the Game. Hot sand hissed under their feet.

Lili herself would have found it hard to say when and why the Game started. Most probably early in the decade after the First Communo-Capitalist Atomic War, but the why was much harder. In the largest sense, the refusal to talk was an admission by modern man that things had got beyond him, that they no longer could be talked out—hence a sort of, not sit-down, but silence strike, a new kind of passive resistance. And along this same line, there was the idea of a protest against McCarthyoid strictures on freedom of speech.

In a smaller sense, the Game was the end-result of the cult of unintelligibility in modern art. What more wonderful way of baffling the stupid bourgeois audience than, instead of uttering half-nonsense, refusing to speak at all? This aspect of the Game was what had attracted the arty Chicago crowd with whom Lili ran, and certainly Lili would have been one of the first to assert that a Game party was the most delightfully nervous entertainment in the world: the nameless introductions, the silent smiles over proffered drinks, everything expressed by gesture, everything beautifully tentative because unspoken. Her tanned feet whistling through the sand, Lili had a sudden vision of how the Crowd had winced when a new girl had broken silence to say, "What a wonderful party," and following it a quick vision of Rolfe smiling at them from in front of his silvered South Chicago fireplace (Was it atom-shards?) just

before he gestured to them, with a wave of his hand and a stamp of his feet, that they were to roll up the rugs and dance the schottische.

It was true that in forbidding man's greatest achievement — vocal communication — the Game had forced people to find and show beauty in the movements of their bodies, it had forced them really to look at faces and guess at feelings, it was a revival of paganism, a sort of endless Eleusinian mysteries. And it made music more precious than anything. Oh, how supremely vocal it made jazz!

On the extreme other hand, the Game was very much like the vows of silence taken by some Christian monastics and mystics.

Of course, most people still did not play the game. They chattered, they thought they argued, they parroted what they heard over radios and listened off tapes, they voted, they dropped atom bombs which were like tantrum noises.

Much nicer not to talk at all.

Lili brushed sweat out of her eyes and looked back at the soldier. He was still treading the yielding sand after her at ten yards, but the anxiety in his face made a bridge between them.

She wondered why he should be playing the Game too, and so unhappily. Why play the Game except with all one's spirit?

The reason Lili played the Game so seriously was that the Russians had atomized Vienna two years ago. Before that the Game had been a fad to her, but afterwards a religion. Lili had never known Vienna, she had been born in Chicago of parents who had managed to survive the Nazis and flee the Russian terror in Austria. With them had come her great-grandmother, who had told her mixed-up reminiscences that were Lili's fairy tales. To Lili, Vienna was a fabulous city where Dr. Freud danced surrealist waltzes in the ballrooms of the court of Franz Joseph, where Arthur Schnitzler had stage-managed and half turned to comedy the tragedy of Mayerling, where the cannon had shot only confetti at the Social Democrat Model Apartments in 1934, and the Nazis been story-book ogres. A city where Dr. Steiner did brain surgery with knives of spun sugar. A city of puff-pastry and profundity, summing up all that was delicate and deep in the human spirit.

There is always a hiding place of romance in the heart; and if it be touched in hatred, the creature may be destroyed. Just as there is a city, not necessarily our own, whose destruction may kill us, no matter how many cities have been destroyed before. People in the 1960's and 1970's found this out.

Or if it does not kill us, it kills our wish to speak. It makes us play the Game. It makes us, like Lili, hold up fingers to ticket sellers. It makes

us greet attractive strangers with the eyes of love, or no voice at all. It makes us express our philosophies in gentle smiles or disdainful wincing. In short, it makes us behave as people on streetcars have been behaving for a long while.

A handful of hot dry sand stung a spot between Lili's bare shoulders. She turned. The soldier had stopped and was frowning at her solemnly. A finger of the hand that had thrown the sand went to his lips. Then suddenly he discharged his gun twice into the sand and yelled savagely and clearly, "Filthy Capitalist hyenas!"

Before the sweet taint of the propellant had reached Lili, even before the dun sand kicked up by the two shots had fallen, the soldier was grinning at her in a winning, foolish way, as if to say, "I don't know why I do these crazy things." Then his face instantly grew grave again and he motioned her on.

Lili hesitated and then trudged along. It was rather disappointing that the soldier had broken the basic rule of the Game, but the crazy thing he had said and the really nervous thing he had done rather made up for it. And beneath his words and actions she had sensed, in redoubled force, the dreadful anxiety that seemed to be his only mode of life and that, she fancied, she could feel flow into her through the hot sand at ten yards. She wondered if bomb-germs — or nerve-gas? — were beginning to affect him. A corner of the long flat roof of Dr. Steiner's cottage was already jutting over the tan crest of the next dune, which curved like a lion's back.

She wanted to look back at the soldier for symptoms, or for another glimpse of that fascinating anxiety, but the solemnity of their progress, like that of a two-car funeral, stopped her. She began to think of the big funeral down in Chicago or Gary. The uranium embers at the heart of the mile-wide bonfire. The little ambulance ants scurrying in from the suburbs to duel with heat and radioactivity. The singed eggs rescued, the burnt aphids escorted to safety. And was Rolfe a twisting, gracefully gesturing cloud of atom shards?

But Chicago and Gary were far away. The dune was dry. The orange clouds settling in from the southwest were not anything special. The sand squirted up between her brown dry toes.

Two khaki shapes lunged from the green trees onto the hot slope of the dune and suddenly turned toward her. Behind her the soldier's gun spoke more swiftly than his repeated yell: "Dirty Capitalist hyenas!" The two soldiers dropped to the sand, their chests squirting red.

Lili looked around at the soldier. While his gun smoked, she frowned at him steadily and pointed a slim finger at the center of his chest.

The soldier smiled stiffly. His shoulders lifted in a small, uneasy shrug.

Lili continued to point, shaking her head when he motioned her on.

The soldier's smile grew worried. Suddenly he pointed at his own chest and at the two dead soldiers, all the while nodding his head. Then he quickly smoothed the sand between his feet and wrote, one letter at a time:

RUSSIANS

And when he had done that, he winked at her and wrinkled his nostrils.

Lili thought: He is one of those who atomized Vienna back in 1975. He is disguised as an American soldier, yet he has just killed two of his disguised comrades. And he is tormented and for some reason he plays the Game.

Lili turned and climbed toward the cottage through the collapsing sand.

The flat roof jutted over a long narrow porch, the floor of which was a full fifteen feet above the tan slope. Before Lili could see Dr. Steiner, she could hear the slow rhythm of his asthmatic breathing, like a storm condensed to tiny puffs. But by the time she was standing at the foot of the stairs, Dr. Steiner was standing at the top, his leathery head bowed over the railing like that of a great bird.

She put a finger to her lips. He nodded twice and looked beyond her.

The soldier, halted 30 feet short of Lili, made rapid writing movements with finger and thumb against the palm of his left hand. Then he reached an arm toward Dr. Steiner and threw back the hand toward himself. The doctor nodded and went back into the house. Lili mounted the stairs. The doctor came out and tossed a large pad of paper and a pencil off the porch. The soldier cautiously retrieved them, steadied the pad against the stock of his gun, and began to write.

After a while he tore off the top sheet, folded it into a paper airplane, and carefully launched it upward. It hesitated, bobbed twice, then dipped and hit the floor with a tiny rattle. Dr. Steiner picked it up, unfolded it, and read the message. When he had finished he looked for a while at the lake under its canopy of orange cloudlets laced by white jet trails. Then he nodded his head.

He did not show the message to Lili. Instead, he motioned her to stand at the far end of the porch. When she obeyed, he beckoned to the soldier.

The stairs had creaked when Lili mounted them, but they did not creak now. When the soldier had finally moused his way to the top, setting both feet on each tread, the doctor softly opened the screen door and they both went inside. Lili noticed that the back of the soldier's thick neck was lumpy and she wondered if that was a symptom.

Then for a long time she watched the lake. As if Dr. Steiner's looking at it had given it new values, Lili felt that never before had the great stretch of silver-flecked water seemed so serene or the curves of sand so tender. And then she was thinking of everything serene and tender she had known or imagined in life. And suddenly she felt, as she had never felt it before — not even with Rolfe, the panicky wrench of the desire to speak out about all this beauty while there was still someone left to speak.

But the world did not want such speech, Lili reminded herself. For decades it had been building silence into all its citizens. Now for the first time, this caused Lili real pain.

For until she had met the soldier, a seldom-visited corner of Lili's mind — a kind of great-grandmotherly chimney corner — had poked gentle scorn at the Game as an impudent adolescent fad, even after Lili had become serious about it. But now that she knew that the Game was played on the opposite side of the world, in earth's grimmest country, and with a desperate seriousness shaming her own feeble make-believe — well, nervous was no longer an adequate word.

She tiptoed back, peered through the screen door, and blinked because there was a sun in the room. Her short nose crinkled at the sour odor of disinfectants.

All the doctor's books and foreign magazines had been swept off the long central table in a big untidy heap. Among them lay his pet terracotta Cretan statuette, broken. Stripped to the waist, the soldier lay face down on the table, one hand gripping a table-leg, the other the rifle, his forearm muscles high white ridges. A master photo-flood beat down on his back. Dr. Steiner, his sleeves rolled up, was probing with two sharp red-dabbled instruments in a vertical incision in the left side of the back of the soldier's neck.

Everything was very still. The doctor was no longer breathing asthmatically.

Up through the thick lips of the incision the doctor drew a wet, red something almost as big as a hen's egg. The soldier twisted the gun back and forth, and the ridges on that arm stood higher, but otherwise he did not move.

Sand on the floor of the porch gritted as Lili ground her bare heel. Like a squirt-gun, an artery in the incision began to spray a thin needle of blood over the heaped books. Dr. Steiner motioned to Lili imperiously through the screen. She hurried in. Without warning he put the wet, red egg into her hands and instantly made a claw-fingered, trembling gesture, as if to say: "This is infinitely precious." Then he pointed to the



door, made a throwing motion, and turned back to the bleeding soldier.

Lili looked at the slimy thing in her hands, wondering if this was how cancer felt. She wanted to drop it and scream, but the Game stopped her. She walked to the door, opened it with a red-smeared hand, went to the head of the stairs, and threw the slimy egg as far as she could. It slithered faintly against the slope and rolled itself into a small sandy ball. She looked at the lake and the yellow sky, but her gaze kept coming back to the sandy ball she could hardly distinguish. Suddenly she rubbed her hands violently against the rough fabric of her shorts. She spit on them and wiped them on the floor. And then, remembering that this was also the soldier's blood, she kissed a faint brown patch on one finger.

When she looked through the door again, Dr. Steiner was making a second incision high in the right side of the soldier's neck, against his skull. Lili watched the blood trickle down the white shoulder, watched the doctor repeatedly reach for tiny clamps to cut off the red flow.

The trickle was slowing when the soldier unclasped his hand from the table-leg and held it up commandingly, though it was still pain-ridged. The doctor stepped back. The room roared as the soldier discharged his gun three times into the roof, his ridged arm jerking with the recoil. "Dirty Capitalist hyenas," was a hoarse whisper.

Dr. Steiner came back through the gun-fumes and the dust showering down from the holes in the roof. The soldier grabbed the table-leg again. The doctor took up his probes. He drew a second and slightly larger red egg from the second incision. But this time he worked much more slowly.

The egg was out, but the doctor was lifting it away from the incision only a fraction of an inch at a time. And then Lili, opening the screen door at last, saw in the bright glare of the photo-flood a network of tiny red drops poised in the air between the red egg and the incision. It was as if a spiderweb connected the two, marked by blood instead of dew. And then Lili realized that the doctor was teasing a multitude of tiny filaments out of the soldier's head. There was a dreadfully personal feel to it, like drawing a thread-worm from an ulcer.

Strand by red-dewed strand the web slacked and dangled, as the ends of the filaments came out of the incision. Finally the last one was out, and blood shaken from the filaments speckled the soldier's white back as Dr. Steiner brusquely handed the second egg toward Lili.

But then the soldier took over. He dropped his gun, put his hands on the table, pushed himself up, and turned around. Dr. Steiner motioned him to lie down, but instead the soldier grabbed the wrist of the hand holding the filamented egg taken from his head and pulled it close to his mouth.

"Ty prokliátaya svoloch!" the soldier screamed. *"Ty bliadskoi syn! Ty, kotoroi zhelayesh by' khozíáynom chelovécheskovo umá! Ty khochesh vot-knutsa v mozg cheloveka! Seichás ubéi menyá! Seichás ubéi menyá!"*

Lili jumped as a great big whip cracked against all of her back. The screen door jerked in and slammed back of its own accord. Something shook the whole wall of the house. Lili ran out on the porch and looked over the sand. Where she had thrown the first red egg there was now a crater five feet across.

She did not know how long she had been standing there when the screen door creaked behind her. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked into Dr. Steiner's face, that was like an old map of Western Civilization. She felt an urge to speak, to ask, but the habit of the Game clamped her vocal chords.

"Lilchen," Dr. Steiner said softly, "little Lili, why do you never speak?"

She said nothing and Dr. Steiner sighed, "I know, it is the Game." He shrugged wearily. "Civilization has played that game for a long time. It won't talk. Do you know about the soldier, Lili?"

She shook her head.

Dr. Steiner said, "That Russian paratrooper — camouflaged in American uniform, of course, and well-trained to speak English — was sworn to

silence much more deeply than you have ever been. Compelled to silence in a most efficient way." His voice was extremely tired now. "I have heard of such things," he said, "but until now I did not truly believe them."

The sun, a flattened red apple, was disappearing behind the rim of lake-water. Lili looked at the places on the old map where Dr. Steiner's eyes were, and nodded like her great-grandmother.

Dr. Steiner said, "In the right side of that soldier's neck, inserted by surgery and the wound healed over, was a tiny radio receiving-and-sending set, strong enough to contact his local commander — who also dropped by parachute, or was here already. Everything he said, everything he heard, could be heard by his local commander. That was why he had to pretend to be killing . . . Capitalist hyenas. Also, you heard him taunt his commander at the end — hardly words for a nice girl's ears, I assure you. You don't know Russian, do you, Lili? Well, he said something about his commander being the son of a low woman and penetrating into his brain, and then there was the taunt that he should kill him." Dr. Steiner paused. "This radio set was also the source of tiny insulated wires which led, chiefly traveling next the dura mater, to every main sector of his brain. These could be used to stimulate his warlike feelings, if he seemed to be getting fainthearted."

The sun was three-quarters in the lake. The dissipating clouds from the bomb turned a deeper orange. Jet trails formed in the sky over Chicago.

"But in the other side of his neck," he said, "there was a bomb that could be touched off whenever his local commander began to worry about his loyalty — or merely felt like . . . blowing his top."

There was a final red flash as the sun went under. The screen door creaked. Lili and Dr. Steiner turned around. The Russian soldier was looking at them blankly.

Dr. Steiner, a bit like a flustered nurse, waved him back.

But the soldier only stood there, watching without tension.

Lili felt that in a while she would be able to talk.

THE THINKER NEEDS A WIFE

It's perfectly plain that the Robot Brain,

To live like a proper he-male,

Should take to his side an appropriate bride —

A Calculating Female.

NORMAN R. JAFFRAY

(from DESTINY)

Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

NO MATTER HOW the coin has depreciated otherwise, your quarter has all its pre-war purchasing power when it comes to buying books of science-fantasy. On the stands today, priced at twenty-five cents (plus the inescapable sales taxes!), are paperback reprints of the following high-quality books: Clifford D. Simak's *CITY* (PermaBooks), that wondrous chronicle of a world relinquished by man to *Canis superior*; Fritz Leiber's masterly blend of magic and science, *CONJURE WIFE* (Lion); *AWAY AND BEYOND* (Avon), nine of A. E. van Vogt's stories, which add up to the staggering total of 92,000 words; and the most enjoyable of Isaac Asimov's intergalactic novels, *THE CURRENTS OF SPACE* (Signet). You'll have to add a dime to your quarter to buy Edmond Hamilton's *CITY AT WORLD'S END* (Galaxy), but it's well worth it. Readers cowering before the specter of TV should be reassured by these indications that the mass merchandisers of books find science-fantasy a highly lucrative item!

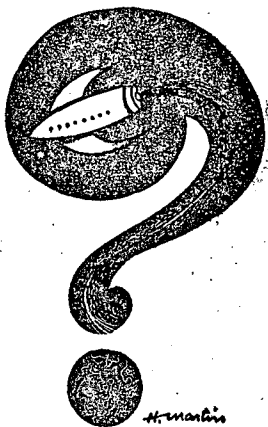
Publishers *will* bring out new books toward the very end of the year; and we find ourselves with a handful of important Too-Late-to-Classify items left over from 1953. We'll note them briefly here, postponing till next month a discussion of the first fruits of 1954 — which, from preliminary signs, looks like another bumper year in both quantity and quality.

Two novels of the last days of 1953 are among the dozen or more of that vintage which easily surpass most "bests" of previous years. Fredric Brown's *THE LIGHTS IN THE SKY ARE STARS* (Dutton, \$3) is surprisingly quiet for adroit melodramatist Brown, though not without its twists and shocks: it's essentially a down-to-earth story of the people and politicians who will bring about the beginnings of space travel, sensitive and moving, with a fine understanding of the human motives behind the drive to the stars. John Wyndham's *OUT OF THE DEEPS* (Ballantine, \$2 hardcover, 35¢ paper; published in England as *THE KRAKEN WAKES*) is also a quiet novel — and a convincing and frightening account of world catastrophe. Mr. Wyndham's alien invaders, who build their strongholds in the depths of the sea and emerge to wage a new kind of war upon the men of the land, are conceived and depicted with beautifully precise detail in a solid and admirable story of small-scale human reactions to vast terror.

Jacketed as "novels" but in reality loose and largely inept stringings together of shorter stories are two books that leave their readers with badly mixed feelings. First of these, for the quality of its thinking, is *MUTANT*, by Lewis Padgett (Gnome, \$2.75), a complete collection of this writer's renowned "Baldy" stories. While these are splendid statements of the difficulties of adjustment between man and esper-man, they eventually become repetitive in plot and situation. The first half of Nat Schachner's *SPACE LAWYER* (Gnome, \$2.75) is good fun, with lots of nice points of interplanetary law; then the book starts taking itself seriously and loses all its charm.

The year's last juvenile was one of the best: Raymond F. Jones's *PLANET OF LIGHT* (Winston, \$2), a sequel to 1952's memorable *SON OF THE STARS* and an equally warm and well-thought-out study in the interaction of teenagers born a million light years apart . . . and of the adult races which they represent. Oddly, these juveniles of Mr. Jones's reveal more novelistic depth and feeling than he has yet shown in an adult novel.

The very last new science fiction book of 1953 was the year's best collection of one author's short stories: Arthur C. Clarke's *EXPEDITION TO EARTH* (Ballantine, \$2 hardcover, 35¢ paper). From the sardonic and technologic *Superiority* (F&SF, August, 1951) to the poetic and philosophical *Second Dawn*, these eleven stories (of which only four have been previously reprinted) represent every facet of the extraordinary and constantly developing talent of a man who may well prove to be the major science fiction writer of the 1950's.



The Jannigogs

The Jannigogs came from the Moon (and they should have stayed there).
On a mountain top they landed their flying-ball;
They hung their talking-bells in a cosy cave there
And buried their happy-wine by a waterfall.

Furry and fat and small are Jannigogs: it was charming,
The gray fox grinned to himself, the way they'd make
Polite little bows when they met him — downright charming!
The fox dined often and well on Jannigog steak.

Jannigogs danced at night on the lonesome mountain
And drummed on their little drums to salute the Moon
And made a hell of a noise. Far down the mountain
The Johnson hounds gave tongue — and not for 'coon.

And "What on airth's that racket?" cried the Johnsons;
They got their guns and they whistled up their dogs. . . .
There were whoops and shots and "Fer goshsakes' look!" from the Johnsons,
And squeals and scuttlings and blood from the Jannigogs.

Came dawn. The Jannigogs rolled out their space-ball
And sadly took each bell from its talky-place,
Counted noses, and wept, and left this Earth-ball
Where horror hides behind such a pretty face.

Jannigogs crouch again in the snug Moon-caverns
And whisper about this terrible world of Men,
And mothers threaten their cubs in the cubby-caverns,
"If you aren't good you'll be taken to Earth again!"

LEAH BODINE DRAKE

In four and a half years of existence, F&SF has published not a single werewolf story. We have brought you new and unorthodox treatments of such classic themes as the Invasion of Earth and the Bargain with the Devil, and of such familiar figures as the Vampire, the Ghoul, the Robot, and even the Mad Scientist; but we had begun to think that no writer had anything new to say about the Werewolf since Jack Williamson's memorable novel DARKER THAN YOU THINK and James Blish's novelet There Shall Be No Darkness. Now at last Bruce Elliott, who has previously revealed unfamiliar aspects of demons, angels, magicians and Klein bottles, creates a werewolf story at once moving, plausible . . . and completely unlike any other you have ever read.

Wolves Don't Cry

by BRUCE ELLIOTT

THE NAKED MAN behind the bars was sound asleep. In the cage next to him a bear rolled over on its back, and peered sleepily at the rising sun. Not far away a jackal paced springily back and forth as though essaying the impossible, trying to leave its own stench far behind.

Flies were gathered around the big bone that rested near the man's sleeping head. Little bits of decaying flesh attracted the insects and their hungry buzzing made the man stir uneasily. Accustomed to instant awakening, his eyes flickered and simultaneously his right hand darted out and smashed down at the irritating flies.

They left in a swarm, but the naked man stayed frozen in the position he had assumed. His eyes were on his hand.

He was still that way when the zoo attendant came close to the cage. The attendant, a pail of food in one hand, a pail of water in the other, said, "Hi Lobo, up and at 'em, the customers'll be here soon." Then he too froze.

Inside the naked man's head strange ideas were stirring. His paw, what had happened to it? Where was the stiff gray hair? The jet-black steel-strong nails? And what was the odd fifth thing that jutted out from his paw at right angles? He moved it experimentally. It rotated. He'd never been able to move his dew claw, and the fact that he could move this fifth exten-

sion was somehow more baffling than the other oddities that were puzzling him.

"You goddamn drunks!" the attendant raved. "Wasn't bad enough the night a flock of you came in here, and a girl bothered the bear and lost an arm for her trouble, no, that wasn't bad enough. Now you have to sleep in my cages! And where's Lobo? What have you done with him?"

The naked figure wished the two-legged would stop barking. It was enough trouble trying to figure out what had happened without the angry short barks of the two-legged who fed him interfering with his thoughts.

Then there were many more of the two-leggeds and a lot of barking, and the naked one wished they'd all go away and let him think. Finally the cage was opened and the two-leggeds tried to make him come out of his cage. He retreated hurriedly on all fours to the back of his cage towards his den.

"Let him alone," the two-legged who fed him barked. "Let him go into Lobo's den. He'll be sorry!"

Inside the den, inside the hollowed-out rock that so cleverly approximated his home before he had been captured, he paced back and forth, finding it bafflingly uncomfortable to walk on his naked feet. His paws did not grip the ground the way they should and the rock hurt his new soft pads.

The two-legged ones were getting angry, he could smell the emotion as it poured from them, but even that was puzzling, for he had to flare his nostrils wide to get the scent, and it was blurred, not crisp and clear the way he ordinarily smelled things. Throwing back his head, he howled in frustration and anger. But the sound was wrong. It did not ululate as was its wont. Instead he found to his horror that he sounded like a cub, or a female.

What had happened to him?

Cutting one of his soft pads on a stone, he lifted his foot and licked at the blood.

His pounding heart almost stopped.

This was no wolf blood.

Then the two-legged ones came in after him and the fight was one that ordinarily he would have enjoyed, but now his heart was not in it. Dismay filled him, for the taste of his own blood had put fear in him. Fear unlike any he had ever known, even when he was trapped that time, and put in a box, and thrown onto a wheeled thing that had rocked back and forth, and smelled so badly of two-legged things.

This was a new fear, and a horrible one.

Their barking got louder when they found that he was alone in his den. Over and over they barked, not that he could understand them, "What

have you done with Lobo? Where is he? Have you turned him loose?"

It was only after a long time, when the sun was riding high in the summer sky, that he was wrapped in a foul-smelling thing and put in a four-wheeled object and taken away from his den.

He would never have thought, when he was captured, that he would ever miss the new home that the two-leggeds had given him; but he found that he did, and most of all, as the four-wheeled thing rolled through the city streets, he found himself worrying about his mate in the next cage. What would she think when she found him gone, and she just about to have a litter? He knew that most males did not worry about their young, but wolves were different. No mother wolf ever had to worry, the way female bears did, about a male wolf eating his young. No indeed; wolves were different.

And being different, he found that worse than being tied up in a cloth and thrown in the back of a long, wheeled thing was the worry he felt about his mate, and her young-to-be.

But worse was to come: when he was carried out of the moving thing, the two-legged ones carried him into a big building and the smells that surged in on his outraged nostrils literally made him cringe. There was sickness, and stench worse than he had ever smelled, and above and beyond all other smells the odor of death was heavy in the long white corridors through which he was carried.

Seeing around him as he did ordinarily in grays and blacks and whites, he found that the new sensations that crashed against his smarting eye balls were not to be explained by anything he knew. Not having the words for red, and green, and yellow, for pink and orange and all the other colors in a polychromatic world, not having any idea of what they were, just served to confuse him even more miserably.

He moaned.

The smells, the discomfort, the horror of being handled, were as nothing against the hurt his eyes were enduring.

Lying on a flat hard thing he found that it helped just to stare directly upwards. At least the flat covering ten feet above him was white, and he could cope with that.

The two-legged thing sitting next to him had a gentle bark, but that didn't help much.

The two-legged said patiently over and over again, "Who are you? Have you any idea? Do you know where you are? What day is this?"

After a while the barks became soothing, and nude no longer, wrapped now in a long wet sheet that held him cocoonlike in its embrace, he found that his eyes were closing. It was all too much for him.

He slept.

The next awakening was if anything worse than the first.

First he thought that he was back in his cage in the zoo, for directly ahead of him he could see bars. Heaving a sigh of vast relief, he wondered what had made an adult wolf have such an absurd dream. He could still remember his puppyhood when sleep had been made peculiar by a life unlike the one he enjoyed when awake. The twitchings, the growls, the sleepy murmurs—he had seen his own sons and daughters go through them and they had reminded him of his youth.

But now the bars were in front of him and all was well.

Except that he must have slept in a peculiar position. He was stiff, and when he went to roll over he fell off the hard thing he had been on and crashed to the floor.

Bars or no bars, this was not his cage.

That was what made the second awakening so difficult. For, once he had fallen off the hospital bed, he found that his limbs were encumbered by a long garment that flapped around him as he rolled to all fours and began to pace fearfully back and forth inside the narrow confines of the cell that he now inhabited.

Worse yet, when the sound of his fall reached the ears of a two-legged one, he found that some more two-legs hurried to his side and he was forced, literally forced into an odd garment that covered his lower limbs.

Then they made him sit on the end of his spine and it hurt cruelly, and they put a metal thing in his right paw, and wrapped the soft flesh of his paw around the metal object and holding both, they made him lift some kind of slop from a round thing on the flat surface in front of him.

That was bad, but the taste of the mush they forced into his mouth was grotesque.

Where was his meat? Where was his bone? How could he sharpen his fangs on such food as this? What were they trying to do? Make him lose his teeth?

He gagged and regurgitated the slops. That didn't do the slightest bit of good. The two-legs kept right on forcing the mush into his aching jaws. Finally, in despair, he kept some of it down.

Then they made him balance on his hind legs.

He'd often seen the bear in the next cage doing this trick and sneered at the big fat oaf for pandering to the two-legs by aping them. Now he found that it was harder than he would have thought. But finally, after the two-legs had worked with him for a long time, he found that he could, by much teetering, stand erect.

But he didn't like it.

His nose was too far from the floor, and with whatever it was wrong with his smelling, he found that he had trouble sniffing the ground under him. From this distance he could not track anything. Not even a rabbit. If one had run right by him, he thought, feeling terribly sorry for himself, he'd never be able to smell it, or if he did, be able to track it down; no matter how fat and juicy, for how could a wolf run on two legs?

They did many things to him in the new big zoo, and in time he found that, dislike it as much as he did, they could force him by painful expedients to do many of the tasks they set him.

That, of course, did not help him to understand why they wanted him to do such absurd things as encumber his legs with cloth that flapped and got in the way, or balance precariously on his hind legs, or any of the other absurdities they made him perform. But somehow he surmounted everything and in time even learned to bark a little the way they did. He found that he could bark *hello* and *I'm hungry* and, after months of effort, ask *why can't I go back to the zoo?*

But that didn't do much good, because all they ever barked back was *because you're a man*.

Now of many things he was unsure since that terrible morning, but of one thing he was sure: he *was* a wolf.

Other people knew it too.

He found this out on the day some outsiders were let into the place where he was being kept. He had been sitting, painful as it was, on the tip of his spine, in what he had found the two-leggeds called a chair, when some shes passed by.

His nostrils closed at the sweet smell that they had poured on themselves, but through it he could detect the real smell, the female smell, and his nostrils had flared, and he had run to the door of his cell, and his eyes had become red as he looked at them. Not so attractive as his mate, but at least they were covered with fur, not like the peeled ones that he sometimes saw dressed in stiff white crackling things.

The fur-covered ones had giggled just like ripening she-cubs, and his paws had ached to grasp them, and his jaws ached to bite into their fur-covered necks.

One of the fur-covered two-leggeds had giggled "Look at that wolf!"

So some of the two-leggeds had perception and could tell that the ones who held him in this big strange zoo were wrong, that he was not a man, but a wolf.

Inflating his now puny lungs to the utmost he had thrown back his head and roared out a challenge that in the old days, in the forest, would have sent a thrill of pleasure through every female for miles around. But instead

of that blood-curdling, stomach-wrenching roar, a little barking, choking sound came from his throat. If he had still had a tail it would have curled down under his belly as he slunk away.

The first time they let him see himself in what they called a mirror he had moaned like a cub. Where was his long snout, the bristling whiskers, the flat head, the pointed ears? What was this thing that stared with dilated eyes out of the flat shiny surface? White-faced, almost hairless save for a jet-black bar of eyebrows that made a straight line across his high round forehead, small-jawed, small-toothed — he knew with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that even a year-old would not hesitate to challenge him in the mating fights.

Not only challenge him but beat him, for how could he fight with those little canines, those feeble white hairless paws?

Another thing that irritated him, as it would any wolf, was that they kept moving him around. He would no sooner get used to one den and make it his own but what they'd move him to another one.

The last one that contained him had no bars.

If he had been able to read his chart he would have known that he was considered on the way to recovery, that the authorities thought him almost "cured" of his aberration. The den with no bars was one that was used for limited liberty patients. They were on a kind of parole basis. But he had no idea of what the word meant and the first time he was released on his own cognizance, allowed to make a trip out into the "real"-world, he put out of his mind the curious forms of "occupational therapy" with which the authorities were deviling him.

His daytime liberty was unreal and dragged by in a way that made him almost anxious to get back home to the new den.

He had all but made up his mind to do so, when the setting sun conjured up visions which he could not resist. In the dark he could get down on all fours!

Leaving the crowded city streets behind him he hurried out into the suburbs where the spring smells were making the night air exciting.

He had looked forward so to dropping on all fours and racing through the velvet spring night that when he did so, only to find that all the months of standing upright had made him too stiff to run, he could have howled. Then too the clumsy leather things on his back paws got in the way, and he would have ripped them off, but he remembered how soft his new pads were, and he was afraid of what would happen to them.

Forcing himself upright, keeping the curve in his back that he had found helped him to stand on his hind legs, he made his way cautiously along a flat thing that stretched off into the distance.

The four-wheeler that stopped near him would ordinarily have frightened him. But even his new weak nose could sniff through the rank acrid smells of the four-wheeler and find, under the too sweet something on the two-legged female, the real smell, so that when she said, "Hop in, I'll give you a lift," he did not run away. Instead he joined the she.

Her bark was nice, at first.

Later, while he was doing to her what her scent had told him she wanted done, her bark became shrill, and it hurt even his new dull ears. That, of course, did not stop him from doing what had to be done in the spring.

The sounds that still came from her got fainter as he tried to run off on his hind legs. It was not much faster than a walk, but he had to get some of the good feeling of the air against his face, of his lungs panting; he had to run.

Regret was in him that he would not be able to get food for the she and be near her when she whelped, for that was the way of a wolf; but he knew too that he would always know her by her scent, and if possible when her time came he would be at her side.

Not even the spring running was as it should be, for without the excitement of being on all fours, without the nimbleness that had been his, he found that he stumbled too much, there was no thrill.

Besides, around him, the manifold smells told him that many of the two-leggeds were all jammed together. The odor was like a miasma and not even the all-pervading stench that came from the four-wheelers could drown it out.

Coming to a halt, he sat on his haunches, and for the first time he wondered if he were really, as he knew he was, a wolf, for a salty wetness was making itself felt at the corners of his eyes.

Wolves don't cry.

But if he were not a wolf, what then was he? What *were* all the memories that crowded his sick brain?

Tears or no, he knew that he was a wolf. And being a wolf, he must rid himself of this soft pelt, this hairlessness that made him sick at his stomach just to touch it with his too soft pads.

This was his dream, to become again as he had been. To be what was his only reality, a wolf, with a wolf's life and a wolf's loves.

That was his first venture into the reality of the world at large. His second day and night of "limited liberty" sent him hurrying back to his den. Nothing in his wolf life had prepared him for what he found in the midnight streets of the big city. For he found that bears were not the only males from whom the shes had to protect their young. . . .

And no animal of which he had ever heard could have moaned, as he

heard a man moan, "If only pain didn't hurt so much . . ." and the strangled cries, the thrashing of limbs, the violence, and the sound of a whip. He had never known that humans used whips on themselves too. . . .

The third time out, he tried to drug himself the way the two-leggeds did by going to a big place where, on a screen, black and white shadows went through imitations of reality. He didn't go to a show that advertised it was in full glorious color, for he found the other shadows in neutral grays and blacks and whites gave a picture of life the way his wolf eyes were used to looking at it.

It was in this big place where the shadows acted that he found that perhaps he was not unique. His eyes glued to the screen, he watched as a man slowly fell to all fours, threw his head back, bayed at the moon, and then, right before everyone, turned into a wolf!

A *werewolf*, the man was called in the shadow play. And if there were werewolves, he thought, as he sat frozen in the middle of all the seated two-leggeds, then of course there must be *weremen* (would that be the word?) . . . and he was one of them. . . .

On the screen the melodrama came to its quick, bloody, foreordained end and the werewolf died when shot by a silver bullet. . . . He saw the fur disappear from the skin, and the paws change into hands and feet.

All he had to do, he thought as he left the theatre, his mind full of his dream, was to find out how to become a wolf again, without dying. Meanwhile, on every trip out without fail he went to the zoo. The keepers had become used to seeing him. They no longer objected when he threw little bits of meat into the cage to his pups. At first his she had snarled when he came near the bars, but after a while, although still puzzled, and even though she flattened her ears and sniffed constantly at him, she seemed to become resigned to having him stand as near the cage as he possibly could.

His pups were coming along nicely, almost full-grown. He was sorry, in a way, that they had to come to wolfhood behind bars, for now they'd never know the thrill of the spring running, but it was good to know they were safe, and had full bellies, and a den to call their own.

It was when his cubs were almost ready to leave their mother that he found the two-leggeds had a place of books. It was called a *library*, and he had been sent there by the woman in the hospital who was teaching him and some of the other aphasics how to read and write and speak.

Remembering the shadow play about the werewolf, he forced his puzzled eyes to read all that he could find on the baffling subject of lycanthropy.

In every time, in every clime, he found that there were references to two-leggeds who had become four-leggeds, wolves, tigers, panthers . . . but never a reference to an animal that had become a two-legged.

In the course of his reading he found directions whereby a two-legged could change himself. They were complicated and meaningless to him. They involved curious things like a belt made of human skin, with a certain odd number of nail heads arranged in a quaint pattern on the body of the belt. The buckle had to be made under peculiar circumstances, and there were many chants that had to be sung.

It was essential, he read in the crabbed old books, that the two-legged desirous of making the change go to a place where two roads intersected at a specific angle. Then, standing at the intersection, chanting the peculiar words, feeling the human skin belt, the two-legged was told to divest himself of all clothing, and then to relieve his bladder.

Only then, the old books said, could the change take place.

He found that his heart was beating madly when he finished the last of the old books.

For if a two-legged could become a four-legged, surely . . .

After due thought, which was painful, he decided that a human skin belt would be wrong for him. The man in the fur store looked at him oddly when he asked for a length of wolf fur long and narrow, capable of being made into a belt. . . .

But he got the fur, and he made the pattern of nail heads, and he did the things the books had described.

It was lucky, he thought as he stood in the deserted zoo, that not far from the cages he had found two roads that cut into each other in just the manner that the books said they should.

Standing where they crossed, his clothes piled on the grass nearby, the belt around his narrow waist, his fingers caressing its fur, his human throat chanting the meaningless words, he found that standing naked was a cold business, and that it was easy to void his bladder as the books had said he must.

Then it was all over.

He had done everything just as he should.

At first nothing happened, and the cold white moon looked down at him, and fear rode up and down his spine that he would be seen by one of the two-leggeds who always wore blue clothes, and he would be taken and put back into that other zoo that was not a zoo even though it had bars on the windows.

But then an aching began in his erect back, and he fell to all fours, and the agony began, and the pain blinded him to everything, to all the strange functional changes that were going on, and it was a long, long time before he dared open his eyes.

Even before he opened them, he could sense that it had happened, for

crisp and clear through the night wind he could smell as he knew he should be able to smell. The odors came and they told him old stories.

Getting up on all fours, paying no attention to the clothes that now smelled foully of the two-leggeds, he began to run. His strong claws scrambled at the cement and he hurried to the grass and it was wonderful and exciting to feel the good feel of the growing things under his pads. Throwing his long head back he closed his eyes and from deep deep inside he sang a song to the wolves' god, the moon.

His baying excited the animals in the cages so near him, and they began to roar, and scream, and those sounds were good too.

Running through the night, aimlessly, but running, feeling the ground beneath his paws was good . . . so good . . .

And then, through the sounds, through all the baying and roaring and screaming from the animals, he heard his she's voice, and he forgot about freedom and the night wind and the cool white moon, and he ran back to the cage where she was.

The zoo attendants were just as baffled when they found the wolf curled up outside the cage near the feeding trough as they had been when they had found the man in the wolf's cage.

The two-legged who was his keeper recognized him and he was allowed to go back into his cage and then the ecstasy, the spring-and-fall-time ecstasy of being with his she . . .

Slowly, as he became used to his wolfhood again, he forgot about the life outside the cage, and soon it was all a matter that only arose in troubled dreams. And even then his she was there to nuzzle him and wake him if the nightmares got too bad.

Only once after the first few days did any waking memory of his two-legged life return, and that was when a two-legged she passed by his cage pushing a small four-wheeler in front of her.

Her scent was familiar.

So too was the scent of the two-legged cub.

Darting to the front of his cage, he sniffed long and hard.

And for just a moment the woman who was pushing the perambulator that contained her bastard looked deep into his yellow eyes and she knew, as he did, who and what he was.

And the very, very last thought he had about the matter was one of infinite pity for his poor cub, who some white moonlit night was going to drop down on all fours and become furred . . . and go prowling through the dark — in search of what, he would never know. . . .

Here, by a young writer, is a remarkably perceptive and detailed study of a theme largely ignored by veteran space-hands: the problem of Terran pregnancy on a planet whose atmosphere will permit adult Earth men and women to live, albeit uncomfortably, but will not allow Terran babies to be born. Recognizing the full consequences of such a situation, Mrs. Bradley has not only told the moving story of an expectant mother on a world of θ Centauri, but also sketched in with a sure hand the fascinating details of intergalactic politics and a complete, though unobtrusive, picture of a culture that was originally Terran but, somewhere along the line, evolved at a right angle to the course followed by the home planet. Perhaps the warmest recommendation we can make to you of Marion Bradley's first (and not last!) appearance in this magazine is to say that her story is, from beginning to end, completely and inarguably, science fiction.

Centaurus Changeling

by MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

"... the only exception to the aforesaid policy was made in the case of Megaera (Theta Centaurus IV) which was given full Dominion status as an independent planetary government; a departure almost without precedent in the history of the Terran Empire. There are many explanations for this variation from the usual practice, the most generally accepted being that which states that Megaera had been colonized from Terra only a few years before the outbreak of the Rigel-Procyon war, which knocked out communications in the entire Centaurus sector of the Galaxy and forced the abandonment of all the so-called Darkovan League colonies, including Megaera, Darkover, Samarra and Vialles. During these Lost Years, as they were called, a period embracing, in all, nearly 600 years . . . the factors of natural selection, and the phenomenon of genetic drift and survival mutation observed among isolated populations, permitted these "lost" colonies to develop along scientific and social lines which made their reclamation by the Terran Empire an imperative political necessity. . . ."

From J. T. Bannerton: A COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY
OF GALACTIC POLITICS, Tape IX.

The Official Residence of the Terran Legate on Megaera was not equipped with a rooftop for landing the small, helicopter-like carioles. This oversight, a gesture of bureaucratic economy from the desk of some supervisor back on Terra, meant that whenever the Legate or his wife left the Residence, they must climb down four flights of stairs to the level of the rarely used streets, and climb again, up the endless twisting stairs, to the platform of the public skyport a quarter of a mile away.

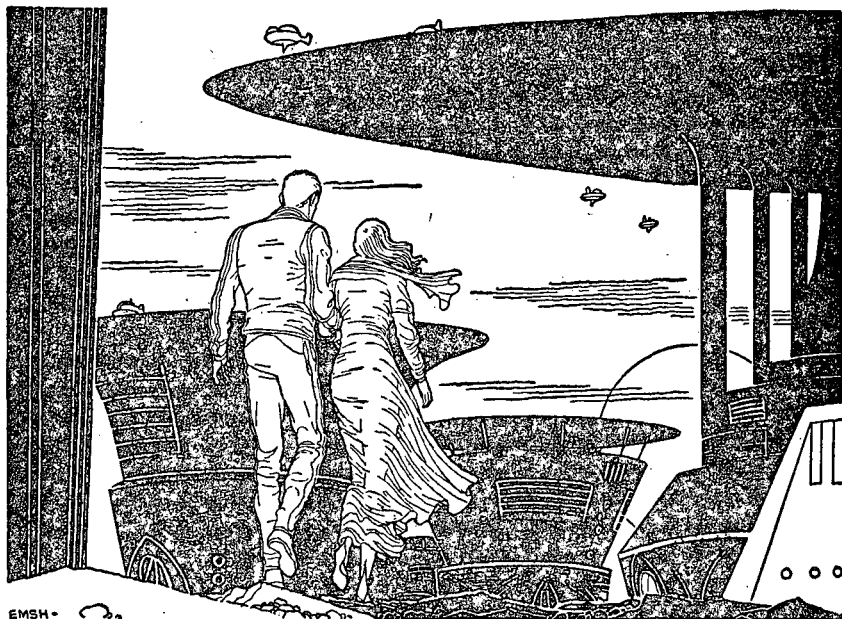
Matt Ferguson swore irritably as his ankle turned in a rut — since no Centaurian citizen ever used the streets for walking if he could help it, they were not kept in condition for that purpose — and took his wife's arm, carefully guiding her steps on the uneven paving.

"Be careful, Beth," he warned. "You could break your neck without half trying!"

"And all those stairs!" The girl looked sulkily up at the black shadow of the skyport platform, stretched over them like a dark wing. The street lay deserted in the lurid light of early evening; red Centaurus, a hovering disk at the horizon, sent a slanting light, violently crimson, down into the black canyon of the street, and the top-heavy houses leaned down, somber and ominous. Wavering shadows gloomed down over them, and a hot wind blew down the length of the street, bearing that peculiar, pungent, all-pervasive smell which is Megaera's atmosphere. A curious blend, not altogether unpleasant, a resinous and musky smell which was a little sickish, like perfume worn too long. Beth Ferguson supposed that sooner or later she would get used to Megaera's air, that combination of stinks and chemical emanations. It was harmless, her husband assured her, to human chemistry. But it did not grow less noticeable with time; after more than a year, Terran Standard time, on Megaera, it was still freshly pungent to her nostrils. Beth wrinkled up her pretty, sullen mouth. "Do we have to go to this dinner, Matt?" she asked plaintively.

The man put his foot on the first step. "Of course, Beth. Don't be childish," he remonstrated gently. "I told you, before we came to Megaera, that my success at this post would depend mostly on my informal relations —"

"If you call a dinner at the Jeth-sans informal —" Beth began petulantly, but Matt went on, "— my informal relations with the Centaurian members of the government. Every diplomatic post in the Darkovan League is just the same, dear. Rai Jeth-san has gone out of his way to make things easy for both of us." He paused, and they climbed in silence for a few steps. "I know you don't like living here. But if I can do what I was sent here to do, we can have any diplomatic post in the Galaxy. I've got to sell the Centaurian Archons on the idea of building the big space station here. And, so far, I'm succeeding at a job no other man would take."



EMSH.

"I can't see why you took it," Beth sulked, snatching pettishly at her nylene scarf, which was flapping like an unruly bird in the hot, grit-laden wind.

Matt turned and tucked it into place. "Because it was better than working as the assistant to the assistant to the under-secretary of Terran affairs attached to the Proconsul of Vialles. Cheer up, Beth. If this space station gets built, I'll have a Proconsulship myself."

"And if it doesn't?"

Matt grinned. "It will. We're doing fine. Most Legates need years to find their way around a difficult post like Megaera." The grin melted abruptly. "Rai Jeth-san is responsible for that, too. I don't want to offend him."

Beth said, and her voice was not very steady, "I understand all that, Matt. But I've been feeling — ah, I hate to be always whining and complaining like this —"

They had reached the wide, flat platform of the skyport. Matt lighted the flare which would attract a cariole, and sank down on one of the benches. "You haven't whined," he told her tenderly. "I know this rotten planet is no place for a Terran girl." He slipped an arm around his wife's waist. "It's hard on you, with other Terran women half a continent away, and I know

you haven't made many friends among the Centaurians. But Rai Jeth-san's wives have been very kind to you. Nethle presented you to her Harp Circle — I don't suppose any Terran woman for a thousand years has even seen one, let alone been presented — and even Cassiana —”

“Cassiana!” said Beth with a catch of breath, picking at her bracelet. “Yes, Nethle's almost too sweet, but she's in seclusion, and until her baby is born, I won't see her. And Wilidh's just a child! But Cassiana — I can't stand her! That — that *freak*! I'm afraid of her!”

Her husband scowled. “And don't think she doesn't know it! She's telepathic, and a rhu'ad —”

“Whatever *that* is,” Beth said crossly. “Some sort of mutant —”

“Still, she's been kind to you. If you were friends —”

“Ugh!” Beth shuddered. “I'd sooner be friends with — with a Sirian lizard-woman!”

Matt's arm dropped. He said coldly, “Well, please be polite to her, at least. Courtesy to the Archon includes all his wives — but particularly Cassiana.” He rose from the bench. “Here comes our cariole.”

The little skycab swooped down to the skyport. Matt helped Beth inside and gave the pilot the address of the Archonate. The cariole shot skyward again, wheeling toward the distant suburb where the Archon lived. Matt sat stiffly on the seat, not looking at his young wife. She leaned against the padding, her fair face sulky and rebellious. She looked ready to cry. “At least, in another month, by their own stupid customs, I'll have a good excuse to stay away from all these idiotic affairs!” she flung at him. “I'll be in seclusion by then!”

It hadn't been the way she'd wanted to tell him, but it served him right!

“Beth!” Matt started upright, not believing.

“Yes! I *am* going to have a baby! And I'm going into seclusion just like these silly women here, and not have to go to a single formal dinner, or Spice Hunt, or Harp Circle, for six cycles! So there!”

Matt Ferguson leaned across the seat. His fingers bit hard into her arm and his voice sounded hoarse. “Elizabeth! Look at me —” he commanded. “Didn't you *promise* — haven't you been taking your anti shots?”

“N-no,” Beth faltered, “I wanted to — oh, Matt, I'm alone so much, and we've been married now almost four years —”

“Oh, my God,” said Matt slowly, and let go her arm. “Oh, my God!” he repeated, and sank back, the color draining from his face.

“Will you stop saying that!” Beth raged. “When I tell you a thing like —” her voice caught on the edge of a sob, and she buried her face in her scarf.

Matt's hand was rough as he jerked her head up, and the gray pallor around his mouth terrified the girl. “You damn little fool,” he shouted, then swal-

lowed hard and lowered his voice. "I guess it's my fault," he muttered. "I didn't want to scare you — you promised to take the shots, so I trusted you — like an idiot!" He released her. "It's classified top-secret, Beth, but it's why this place is closed to colonization, and it's why Terran men don't bring their wives here. This damned, stinking, freak atmosphere! It's perfectly harmless to men, and to most women. But for some reason, it plays hell with the female hormones if a woman gets pregnant. For 60 years — since Terra set up the Legation here — not one Terran baby has been born alive. Not *one*, Beth. And eight out of ten women who get pregnant — oh, God, Betty, I trusted you!"

She whispered "But this — this was a Terran colony, once —"

"They've adapted — maybe. We've never found out why Centaurian women go into seclusion when they're pregnant, or why they hide the children so carefully."

He paused, looking down at the thinning jungle of roofs. There would not be time to explain it all to Beth. Even if she lived — but Matt did not want to think about that. They never *sent* married men to this planet, but Centaurian custom could not admit a single man to be mature enough to hold a place in government. He had succeeded at this post where single men, twice his age, had been laughed at by the Archons. But what good was that now?

"Oh, God, Beth," he whispered, and his arms went out blindly to hold her close. "I don't know what to do —"

She sobbed softly, scared, against him. "Oh, Matt, I'm afraid! Can't we go home — home to Terra? I want — I want to go home — to go home —"

"How can we?" the man asked drearily. "There won't be a star-ship leaving the planet for three months. By that time, you wouldn't be able to live through blastoff. Even now, you couldn't pass a physical for space." He was silent for minutes, his arms strained around her, and his eyes looked haunted. Then, almost visibly, he managed to pull himself together.

"Look, the first thing tomorrow, I'll take you to the Medical HQ. They've been working on it. Maybe — don't worry, darling. We'll get along." His voice lapsed again, and Beth, wanting desperately to believe him, could find no reassurance in the words. "You're going to be all right," he told her again. "Aren't you?" But she clung to him and did not answer. After a long, strained silence, he roused a little, and let her go, glancing from the windbreak of the cariole cabin.

"Beth, darling, fix your face —" he urged her gently. "We'll be late, and you can't go down looking like that —"

For a minute Beth sat still, simply not believing that after what she had told him, he would still make her go to the detested dinner. Then, looking

at his tensed face, she suddenly knew it was the one thing on earth—no, she corrected herself with grim humor, the one thing on Theta Centaurus IV, Megaera, that she *must* do.

"Tell him not to land for a minute," she said shakily. She unfastened her wrist compact, and silently began to repair the wreckage of her cosmetics.

Above the Archonate, the cariole maneuvered frantically for place with another careening skycab, and after what seemed an imminent clash of tangled gyroscopes, slid on to the skyport only seconds before it. Beth shrieked, and Matt flung the door open and abused the pilot in choice Centaurian.

"I compliment you on your perfect command of our language," murmured a soft creamy voice, and Matt flushed darkly as he saw the Archon standing at the very foot of the roofport. He murmured confused apology; it was hardly the way to begin a formal evening. The Archon lipped a buttery smile. "I pray you do not think of it. I disregard speech of yours. It is again not spoken." With an air of esthetic unconcern, he gestured welcome at Beth, and she stepped down, feeling clumsy and awkward. "I stand where you expect me not, only because I think Senior Wife mine in cariole this one," the Archon continued. Out of courtesy to his guests, he was speaking a mangled dialect of Galactic Standard; Beth wished irritably that he would talk Centaurian. She understood it as well as Matt did. She also had the uncomfortable feeling that the Archon sensed her irritation and that it amused him; a sizable fraction of the Megaeran population was slightly telepathic.

"You must excusing Cassiana," the Archon offered languidly as he conducted his guests across the great open skycourt which was the main room of a Centaurian home. "She went to the City, one of our families visiting, for she is rhu'ad, and must be ever at their call when she is needed. And Second Wife is most fortunately in seclusion, so you must excusing her also," he continued as they approached the lighted penthouse. Beth murmured the expected compliments on Nethle's coming child. "Youngest wife then be our hostess, and since she not used to formal custom, we be like barbarian this night."

Matt gave his wife a vicious nudge in the ribs. "Cut that out," he whispered, savagely, and with an effort that turned her face crimson, Beth managed to suppress her rising giggles. Of course there was nothing even faintly informal in the arrangement of the penthouse room into which they were conducted, nor in the classic and affected poses of the other guests. The women in their stiff metallic robes cast polite, aloof glances at Beth's soft drapery, and their greetings were chilly, musical murmurs. Under their

slitted, hostile eyes, Beth felt despairingly that she and Matt were intruders here, barbaric atavisms; too big and muscular, too burned by a yellow sun, blatantly and vulgarly colorful. The Centaurians were little and fragile, not one over five feet tall, bleached white by the red-violet sun, their foamy, blue-black hair a curious metallic halo above stiff classicized robes. Humans? Yes — but their evolution had turned off at right angles a thousand years ago. What had those centuries done to Megaera and its people?

Swathed in a symbolic costume, Rai Jeth-san's youngest wife Wilidh sat stiffly in the great Hostess Chair. She spoke to the guests formally, but her mouth quirked up at Beth in the beginnings of a giggle. "Oh, my good little friend," she whispered in Galactic Standard, "I *die* with these formals! These are Cassiana's friends, and not mine, for no one knew she would not be here tonight! And they laugh at me, and stick up their backs, all stiff, like this —" she made a rude gesture, and her topaz eyes glinted with mischief. "Sit here by me, Beth, and talk of something very dull and stupid, for I *die* trying not to disgrace me by laughing! When Cassiana comes back —"

Wilidh's mirth was infectious. Beth took the indicated seat, and they talked in whispers, holding hands after the fashion of Centaurian women. Wilidh was too young to have adopted the general hostility toward the Terran woman; in many ways, she reminded Beth of an eager school girl. It was hard to remember that this merry child had been married as long as Beth herself; still more incredible that she was already the mother of three children.

Suddenly Wilidh turned color, and stood up, stammering confused apologies. "Forgive me, forgive me, Cassiana —"

Beth also rose, but the Archon's Senior Wife gestured for them to resume their seats. Cassiana was not dressed for formal dining. Her gray street wrap was still folded over a plain dress of dark thin stuff, and her face looked naked without cosmetics, and very tired. "Never mind, Wilidh. Remain hostess for me, if you will." She smiled flittingly at Beth. "I am sorry I am not here to greet you." Acknowledging their replies with a weary politeness, Cassiana moved past them like a wraith, and they saw her walking across the skycourt, and disappearing down the wide stairway that led to the lower, private parts of the house.

She did not rejoin them until the formal dinner had been served, eaten and removed, and the soft-footed servants were padding around the room with bowls and baskets of exotic fruit and delicacies and gilded cups of frosty mountain nectar. The penthouse shutters had been thrown wide, so that the guests could watch the flickering play of lightning from the giant magnetic storms which were almost a nightly occurrence on Megaera. They

were weirdly beautiful and the Centaurians never tired of watching them, but they terrified Beth. She preferred the rare calm nights when Megaera's two immense moons filled the sky with uncanny green moonlight; but now thick clouds hid the faces of Alecto and Tisiphone, and the jagged bolts leaped and cast lurid shadows on the great massy clouds. Through the thunder, the eerie noise which passed, on Megaera, for music, was wailing from the slitted walls. In its shadow, Cassiana ghosted into the room and sat down between Beth and Wilidh. She did not speak for minutes, listening with evident enjoyment to the music and its counterpoint of thunder. Cassiana was somewhat older than Beth, small and exquisite, a filigree dainty woman fashioned of gilded silver. Her ash blonde hair had metallic lights, and her skin and eyes had almost the same hue, a gold-cream, smudged with gilt freckles, and with a sort of luminous, pearly glow . . . the distinguishing mark of a curious mutation called *rhu'ad*. The word itself meant only *pearl*; neither Beth nor any other Terran knew what it implied.

The servants were passing around tiny baskets, curiously woven of reeds from the Sea of Storms. Deferentially, they laid a basket before the three women. "Oh, *sharigs!*" Wilidh cried with a childish gusto. Beth glanced into the basket at the wriggling mass of small, greenish-gold octopods, less than three inches long, writhing and struggling in their nest of odorous seaweed and striking feebly at each other with the stumps of claws they did not know had been snapped off. The sight disgusted Beth, but Wilidh took a pair of tiny tongs and picked up one of the revolting little creatures, and as Beth watched with fascinated horror, thrust it whole into her mouth. Daintily, but with relish, her sharp small teeth crunched the shell; she sucked, and fastidiously spat the empty shell into her palm.

"Try one, Beth," Cassiana suggested kindly. "They are really delicious."

"N — no, thank you," Beth said weakly — and suddenly disgraced herself and all her conditioning by turning aside and being very completely and excruciatingly sick on the shimmering floor. She barely heard Cassiana's cry of distress, although she was conscious of a prim offended murmur, and knew she had outraged custom beyond all credibility. Through helpless spasms of retching, she was conscious of hands and voices. Then she was picked up in strong familiar arms, and heard Matt's worried "Honey, are you all right?"

She knew she was being carried across the skycourt and into a lower room, and opened her eyes sickly to see Cassiana and Matt standing over her. "I'm — I'm so sorry —" she whispered. Cassiana's thin hand patted hers, comfortingly. "Do not think of it," she reassured, "Legate Furr-ga-soon, your wife will be well enough, you may return to the other guests," she

said, gently, but in a tone that unmistakably dismissed him. There was no polite way to protest. Matt went, looking back doubtfully. Cassiana's strange eyes looked rather pitying. "Don't try to talk," she admonished. Beth felt too sick and weak to move and being alone with Cassiana terrified her. She lay quiet on the big divan, tears slipping weakly down her face. Cassiana's hand still clasped hers; in a kind of childish petulance, Beth pulled her hand away, but the slender fingers only closed more tightly around Beth's wrist. "Be still," said Cassiana, not unkindly, but in a tone of absolute command, and she sat there, looking down at Beth with a staring intensity, for some minutes. Finally she sighed and freed Beth's hand.

"Do you feel better now?"

"Why — yes!" said Beth, surprised. Quite suddenly, the nausea and the pain in her head were altogether gone. Cassiana smiled. "I am glad. No — lie quiet. Beth, I think you should not ride in cariole tonight, why not stay here? You can visit Nethle — she has missed you since she went into seclusion."

Beth almost cried out with surprise. This *was* rare — for an outsider to be invited into a Centaurian house any further than the skycourt and penthouse reserved for social affairs. Then, with a stab of frightened memory, she recalled the reason for Nethle's seclusion — and her own fears. Nethle was her friend, even Cassiana had shown her kindness. Perhaps in a less formal atmosphere she might be able to ask something about the curious taboo which surrounded the birth of children on Megaera, perhaps learn some way of averting her own danger . . . she closed her eyes and leaned against the cushions for a moment. If nothing else, it meant reprieve. For a little while she need not face Matt's gallantly concealed fear, his reproach. . . .

Matt, returning with Cassiana, quickly gave consent. "If that's what you really want, honey," he said gently. As she looked up into his tense face, Beth's impulse suddenly changed. She wanted to cry out "No — don't leave me here, take me home —" a night here in this strange place, alone with Centaurian women who were, however friendly they might be, entirely alien, seemed a thing too fearful to contemplate. She felt inclined to cry. But Cassiana's eyes on her proved rather steadying, and Beth's long conditioning in the ceremonial life necessary on Megaera triumphed over emotions she knew to be irrational.

Her husband bent and kissed her lightly. "I'll send a cariole for you tomorrow," he promised.

The lower portions of a Centaurian home were especially designed for a polygamous society in harmony with itself. They were carefully compart-

mented, and the only entrance from one to the other was from the great common stairway which led to the roof and sky court. Roughly a third of the house was sectioned off for the habitation of Rai Jeth-san and his seasonal consort. The remainder was women's quarters, and the Archon himself might not enter them without specific invitation. In effect, Megaera's polygamous society was a rotational monogamy, for although Rai Jeth-san had three wives — the legal maximum was five — he had only one at a time and their alteration was strictly regulated by tradition. The surplus women lived together, always on terms of the most cordial friendship. Cassiana took precedence over the others, by custom, but there was the closest affection among all three — which had surprised Beth at first, especially when she found out that this was by no means rare; the bond between the wives of one man was traditionally the strongest family tie in existence, far stronger than the tie between natural sisters.

Beth had discovered long ago that she was not alone in her awe of Cassiana, who was one of the peculiar patriciate of the planet. Men and women fought for the privilege of serving the rhu'ads; Beth, relaxing into the almost sybaritic luxury of the women's quarters, wondered again — what was Cassiana's strange power over the Centaurians? She knew Cassiana was one of the rare telepaths who were found in the Darkovan planets, but that alone would not have explained it, nor would Cassiana's odd beauty. On Megaera there were perhaps 10,000 women like Cassiana: curiously beautiful, more curiously revered. There were no male rhu'ad. Beth had seen both men and women throw themselves to the ground in a burst of spontaneous emotion as one of the small, pearl-colored women passed, but had never understood, or dared to ask.

Cassiana asked her, "Would you like to see Nethle before you sleep — and our children?"

This was, indeed, a strange relaxation of tradition; Beth knew no Terran had ever seen a Centaurian child. Astonished, she followed Cassiana into a lower room.

It seemed full of children. Beth counted; there were nine, the youngest only a baby in arms, the oldest about ten. They were pale, pretty children, like hothouse flowers reared in secret. Seeing the stranger, they clustered together, whispering to each other timidly, staring with wide eyes at her strange hair and curious garments.

"Come here, my darlings," said Cassiana in her soft pleasant voice. "Don't stare." She was speaking in Centaurian, a further gesture of friendliness.

One little boy — the rest of the children were all girls — piped up valiantly, "Is she another mother for us?"

Cassiana laughed. "No, my son. Aren't three mothers enough?"

Nethle rose from a cushiony chair and came to Beth, her hands outstretched in welcome. "I thought you had forgotten me! Of course, you poor Terran women, only one wife to look after a husband, I cannot see how you ever have time for *anything*!"

Beth blushed — Nethle's outspoken references to Beth's "unhappy" state as a solitary wife, always embarrassed her. But she returned Nethle's greeting with genuine pleasure — Nethle Jeth-san was perhaps the only Centaurian whom Beth could tolerate without that sense of uneasy dislike.

She said, "I've missed you, Nethle," but secretly she was dismayed at the change in her friend. Since Nethle had gone into seclusion, months ago, she had changed frighteningly. In spite of the distortion of pregnancy, Nethle seemed to have lost weight, her small face looked haggard, and her skin was a ghastly color. She walked shakily, and sat down almost at once after greeting Beth, but her gay manner and brilliant joyous eyes belied her illness. She and Beth talked quietly, about inconsequential things — Centaurian custom almost outlawed serious conversation — while Cassiana curled up, kittenlike, in a nest of soft pillows, picking up the littlest baby.

Two toddlers came and tried to crawl up on her knees at once, so Cassiana laughed and slid down on the floor, letting the children climb all over her, snuggle against her shoulder, tug at her garments and her elaborately arranged hair. She was so tiny that she looked like a little girl with a lapful of dolls. Beth asked her — hesitantly, for she did not know if it was polite to ask — "Which are your children, Cassiana?"

Cassiana glanced up. "In a way, all, and in another way, none," she said curtly and Beth thought she had trespassed on courtesy; but Nethle put her hand on the solitary boy's head. "Cassiana has no children, Beth. She is rhu'ad, and rhu'ad women do not bear children. This is my son; and the oldest girl, and the girl with long hair. Those," she indicated the twin toddlers and the baby in Cassiana's lap, "are Wilidh's. The rest are Clotine's. Clotine was our sister, who died many cycles ago."

Cassiana gently put the children aside and came to Beth. She looked at one of the little girls playing in the corner. She made no sound, but the child turned and suddenly ran to Cassiana, flinging her arms around the rhu'ad. Cassiana hugged her, then let her go, and — to Beth's surprise — the tiny girl came and tugged at Beth's skirt, clambering into her lap. Beth put an arm around her, looking down in astonishment.

"Why, she —" she broke off, not knowing, again, whether she should remark on the extraordinary likeness. The tiny girl — she seemed about four — had the same, pearly, lustrous skin; her hair was a silvery eiderdown, pallid and patrician. Cassiana noted her discomfiture and laughed gaily. "Yes, Arli is rhu'ad. She is mine."

"I thought —"

"Oh, Cassiana, stop it," Nethle protested, laughing. "She doesn't understand!"

"There are many things she does not understand," said Cassiana abruptly, "but I think she will have to learn to understand them. Bet', you have done a terribly unwise thing. Terran women *cannot* have children here in safety!"

Beth could only blink in amazement. The self test taken the day before had shown her pregnancy to be less than a month advanced. "How *ever* did you know?" she asked.

"Your poor husband," Cassiana's voice was gentle. "I felt his fear like a gray murk, all evening. It is not pleasant to be telepath, sometimes. It is why I try not to go in crowds, I cannot help invading the privacy of others. Then, when you were so sick, I knew."

Nethle seemed to freeze, to go rigid. Her arms fell to her sides: "So that is it!" she whispered almost inaudibly. Then she burst out, "And that is the way with the women of Terra! That is why your Earthmen will never take this planet! As long as they despise us and come as conquerors, they cannot come here where their women — die!" Her eyes glared. She rose and stood, heavy, distorted, menacing, over Beth, her lips drawn back in an animal snarl, her arm raised as if to strike. Cassiana gasped, sprang up, and with a surprising strength, she pushed Nethle back into her chair.

"Bet', she is raving — even women here, sometimes —"

"Raving!" Nethle said with a curl of her lip. "Wasn't there a day when our women and their unborn children died by the hundreds because we did not know the air was poison? When women died, or were kept in air-tight rooms and given oxygen till their children were born, and then left to die? When men married a dozen wives to be sure of one living child? Did the Terrans help us then, when we begged them to evacuate the planet? No! They had a war on their hands — for 600 years they had a war on their hands! Now they've finished their private wars, they try to come back to Megaera —"

"Nethle! Be quiet!" Cassiana commanded angrily. Beth had sunk into the cushions, but through her cupped hands she saw that Nethle's face blazed, a contorted mask of fury. "Yes, yes, Cassiana," her voice was a mocking croon, "Bet' condescends to make friends with me — and now she will see what happens to the women of Terra who mock our customs instead of finding out why we have them!" The wildness of her hysteria beat and battered at Beth. "Oh, yes, I liked you," she snarled, "but could you really be friends with a Centaurian woman? Don't you think I know you mock our rhu'ad? Could you live equal to us? Get out!" she shouted. "Get off our world! Go away, all of you! Leave us in peace!"

"*Nethle!*" Cassiana grasped the woman's shoulders and shook her, hard, until the wildness went out of her face. Then she pushed Nethle down in the cushions, where she lay sobbing. Cassiana looked down at her sorrowfully. "You hate worse than she hates. How can there ever be peace, then?"

"You have always defended her," Nethle muttered, "and she hates you worst of all!"

"That is exactly why I have more responsibility," Cassiana answered. She went to the curtained door at the end of the room. At her summons, a servant came and began unobtrusively to shepherd the children out of the room. They went obediently, the older ones looking scared and bewildered, glancing timidly at the weeping Nethle; the little ones reluctant, clinging to Cassiana, pouting a little as she gently pushed them out the door. Cassiana drew the curtain firmly down behind them; then went back to Nethle and touched her on the shoulder. "Listen," she said.

Then Beth had the curious feeling that Nethle and Cassiana were conversing through some direct mental exchange from which she was excluded. Their changing expressions, and faint gestures, told her that, and a few emphatic, spoken words seemed to give point to the soundless conversation — it made Beth's flesh crawl.

"My decisions are always final," Cassiana stated.

Nethle muttered " . . . cruel of you . . . "

Cassiana shook her head.

After long minutes of speech-silence, Cassiana said aloud, quietly, "No, I have decided. I did it for Clotine. I would do it for you — or for Wilidh, if you were fool enough to try what Bet' has done."

Nethle flared back, "I wouldn't *be* fool enough to try to have a baby *that way* —"

Cassiana checked her with a gesture, rose, and went to Beth, who was still lying huddled in the pillows of the big divan. "If I, who am rhu'ad, do not break the laws," she said, "then no one will ever dare to break them, and our planet will stagnate in dead traditions. Bet', if you can promise to obey me, and to ask me no questions, then I, who am rhu'ad, promise you this: you may have your child without fear, and your chance of life will be —" she hesitated, "equal to a Centaurian woman's."

Beth looked up, speechless, her eyes wide. A dozen emotions tangled in some secret part of her mind, fear, distrust — anger. Yet reason told her that Cassiana was showing disinterested kindness in the face of what must certainly have been obvious to her, Beth's own dislike. At the moment Beth was unaware that proximity to the telepath was sharpening her own sense perceptions, but for the first time in months she was thinking reasonably, unblurred by emotion.

Cassiana insisted, "Can you promise? Can you promise, especially, not to ask me questions about what I have to do?"

And Beth nodded soberly. "I'll promise," she said.

The pale pink, watery sunlight looked feeble and anachronistic on the white, sterile, characteristically Terran walls, floors and furnishings of the Medical HQ; and the white indoor face of the old doctor looked like some sun-sheltered slug.

"He's lived here so long, he's half Centaurian himself," Matt Ferguson thought irrelevantly, and threw down the chart in his hand. "You mean there's nothing to be done!" he said bluntly.

"We never say that in my profession," Dr. Bonner told him simply. "While there's life, and all the rest of it. But it looks bad. You never should have left it up to the girl to make sure she took her anti shots. Women aren't reliable about that kind of thing — not normal women. A woman's got to be pretty damned abnormal, to be conscientious about contraceptives." He frowned. "You know, it's not a question of adapting, either. If anything, the third, fourth, fourteenth generations are more susceptible than the first. The planet seems so perfectly healthy that women simply don't believe it until they *do* get pregnant, and then it's too late."

"Abortion?" Matt suggested, lowering his head. Dr. Bonner shrugged. "Worse yet. Operative shock on top of the hormone reaction would just kill her now, instead of later." He leaned his head on his hands. "Whatever it is in the air, it doesn't hurt anybody until we get the flood of female hormones released in pregnancy. Then it starts reacting, and we get a kind of internal explosion. We've tried everything — manufacturing our own air — chemically pure, but we can't get that stink out of it, and we can't keep it pure. There's just something linked into the atomic structure of the whole damned planet. It doesn't bother test animals, so we can't do any experimenting. It's just the human, female hormones of pregnancy. We've even tried locking the women in airtight domes, and giving them pure oxygen, the whole nine months. But we get the same reaction. Pernicious vomiting, weight loss, confusion of the balance centers, convulsions — and if the foetus isn't aborted, it's oxygen-starved and a monster. I've lived on Megaera 40 years, Matt, and I haven't delivered a live baby yet."

Matt raged, "Then how do the Centaurians manage? They have children, all right!"

"Have you ever seen one?" asked Dr. Bonner tersely. At Matt's denial, he continued, "Neither have I — in 40 years. For all I know, Centaurian women cultivate their babies in test tubes. Nobody's ever seen a pregnant Centaurian woman, or a child under about ten years old. But one of our

men — ten, twelve years ago — got a Centaurian girl pregnant. Of course, her family threw her out — right in the damn' street. Our man married the girl — he'd wanted to, anyhow. The man — I won't tell you his name — brought her in to me. I thought maybe — but the story was just *exactly* the same. Nausea, pernicious vomiting — all the rest. You wouldn't believe the things we tried to save that girl. I didn't know I had so much imagination myself." He dropped his eyes, bitter with an old failure. "But she died. The baby lived. It's up in the incurable ward."

"*Jesus!*" Matt shuddered uncontrollably. "What can I *do*?"

Dr. Bonner's eyes were very sorrowful. "Bring her in, Matt, right away. We'll do our damndest for her." His hand found the younger man's shoulder as he rose, but Matt was not conscious of the touch. He never knew how he got out of the building, but after a reeling walk through streets that twisted around his bleared eyes, he heard the buzz of a descending cariole, and Cassiana Jeth-san's level voice.

"Legate Furr-ga-soon?"

Matt raised his head numbly. She was about the last person he cared to see. But Matt Ferguson was a Legate of the Terran Empire, and had undergone strenuous conditioning for this post. He could no more have been rude to anyone to whom courtesy was required, than he could have thrown himself from a moving cariole. So he said with careful graciousness, "I greet you, Cassiana."

She signalled the pilot to set the hovering skycab down. "This meeting is fortunate," she said quietly. "Get into this cariole, and ride with me."

Matt obeyed, mostly because he lacked, at the moment, the ingenuity to form an acceptable excuse. He climbed in; the skycab began to ascend again over the city. It seemed a long time before Cassiana said, "Bet' is at the Archonate. I have made a finding the most unfortunate. Understand me, Legate, you are in situation of the baddest."

"I know," Matt said grimly. His wife's dislike of Cassiana suddenly became reasonable to him. He had never been alone with a telepath before, and it made him a little giddy. There was almost a physical vibration in the small woman's piercing gaze. Cassiana's mangling of Galactic Standard — she spoke it better than her husband, but still abominably — was another irritation which Matt tried to hide. As if in answer to his unspoken thought, Cassiana switched to her own language. "Why did you come to Megaera?"

What a fool question, Matt thought irritably. Why did any man take a diplomatic post? "My government sent me."

"But not because you liked Megaera, or us? Not because you wanted to live here, or cared about Terrans and Centaurians getting along? Not because you cared about the space station?"

Matt paused, honestly surprised. "No," he said, "I suppose not." Then annoyance triumphed. "How *can* we live together? Your people don't travel in space. Ours can't live in health or ordinary comfort on this — this stinking planet! How can we do anything but live apart and leave you to yourselves?"

Cassiana said slowly, "We wanted, once, to abandon this colony. For all Terra cared, we could live or die. Now they have found out their lost property might be worth —"

Matt sighed. "The Imperialists who abandoned Megaera have all been dead for hundreds of years," he pointed out wearily. "Now, we have to have some contact with your planet, because of the political situation. You know that. No one is trying to exploit Megaera."

"I know that," she admitted. "Perhaps 50 other people on the whole planet realize that. The rest are one seething mass of public opinion, and under the anti-propaganda laws, we can't change that." She stopped. "But I didn't want to talk politics. Why did you bring Bet' here, Legate?"

Matt bit his lip. Under her clear eyes he told the truth. "Because I knew a single man couldn't succeed at this post."

Cassiana mused. "It's a pity. It's almost certain that this affair will close out the Legation here. No married man will want to come, and we cannot accept a single man in such an important position. It is against our most respected tradition for a man to remain single after he is mature. Our only objection to your space station is the immense flood of unattached personnel who will come here to build it — drifters, unmarried men, military persons — such an influx would throw Megaera into confusion. We would be glad to accept married colonists who wanted to settle here."

"You *know* that's impossible!" Matt said.

"Maybe," Cassiana said thoughtfully. "It *is* a pity. Because it is obvious that the Terrans need Megaera, and Megaera needs some outside stimulus. We're turning stagnant." She was silent for a minute. Then she continued, "But I'm talking politics again. I suppose I wanted to see if it was in you to be honest. Perhaps, if you had grown angry sooner, been less concerned with polite formalities — angry men are honest men. We like honesty, we rhu'ad."

Matt's smile was bitter. "We are conditioned in courtesy. Honesty comes second."

"A proof that you are not suited to a society where any fraction of the population is telepathic," said Cassiana bluntly. "But that is not important. This is — Bet' is in very real danger, Legate. I promise nothing — even we Centaurians die sometimes — but if you will let her live at the Archonate for three, maybe four of your months — I think I can promise you she'll live. And probably the baby, too."

Hope seethed in Matt. "You mean — go into seclusion —"

"That; and more," said Cassiana gravely. "You must not attempt to see her yourself, and you must keep your entire Legation from knowing where she is, or why. That includes your personal friends and your officials. Can you do this? If not, I promise nothing."

"But that isn't possible —"

Cassiana dismissed the protest. "It is your problem. I am not a Terran, I don't know how you will manage it."

"Does Beth want to —"

"At this moment, no. You are her husband, and it is your child's life at stake. You have authority to order her to do it."

"We don't think of things that way on Terra. I don't —"

"You are not on Terra now," Cassiana reminded him flatly.

"Can I see Beth before I decide? She'll want to make arrangements, pack her things —"

"No; you must decide here, now. It may already be too late. As for her 'things,' the pearly eyes held delicate scorn, "she must have nothing from Terra near her."

"What kind of rubbish is that?" Matt demanded. "Not even her clothes?"

"I will provide anything she needs," Cassiana assured him. "Believe me, it is necessary. No — don't apologize. Anger is honesty."

"Look," Matt suggested, still trying to compromise acceptably. "I'll want her to see a Terran doctor, first, the authorities —"

Without warning, Cassiana lost her temper.

"You Terrans," she exploded, in a gust of fury that was like a physical blow. "You stupid lackwit from a planet of insane authoritarians, I *told* you, you must say nothing to anyone! This isn't a political matter, it's her *life*, and your child's! What can your so-called *authorities* do?"

"What can *you* do?" Matt shouted back. Protocol went overboard. The man and woman from two alien star systems glared at each other across a thousand years of evolution.

Then Cassiana said coldly, "That is the first sensible question you have asked. When our planet was — jettisoned as useless — we had to acquire certain techniques the hard way. I can't tell you exactly what. It isn't allowed. If that answer is not adequate, I am sorry. It is the only answer you will ever get. Wars have been fought on Megaera because the rhu'ad have refused to answer that question. We've been hounded and stoned, and sometimes worshipped. Between science and religion and politics, we've finally worked out the answer, but I have never told even my husband. Do you think I would tell a — a bureaucrat from Terra? You can accept my offer or refuse it — now."

Matt looked over the windbreak of the cariole at the wide-flung roofs of the city. He felt torn with terrible indecision. Reared in a society of elaborately delegated responsibilities, it went against all his conditioning — how could one man make a decision like this? How could he explain Beth's absence? What would his government say, if they discovered that he had not even consulted the medical authorities? Still, the choice was bald — Bonner had made it very clear that he had no hope. It was: trust Cassiana, or watch Beth die.

And the death would be neither quick nor easy.

"All right," he said, pressing his lips together. "Beth — Beth doesn't like you, as you probably know, and I'll be — I'll be everlastingly damned if I know why you are doing this! But I — I can't see any other way out. This isn't a very polite way to put it, but it was you who insisted on honesty. Go ahead. Do what you can. I —" his voice suddenly strangled, but the little rhu'ad did not take the slightest notice of his losing struggle for self-control. With an air of remote detachment, she directed the driver of the cariole to set him down before the Residence.

During the brief ride there, she did not speak a word. Only when the cariole settled on the public skyport did she raise her head. "Remember," she said quietly, "you must not call at the Archonate, or attempt to see Bet". If you have business with the Archon, you must arrange to meet him elsewhere. That will not be easy."

"Cassiana — what can I say —"

"Say nothing," she advised, not smiling, but there was a glint in the pearly eyes. In a less reserved face, it might have been friendly amusement. "Sometimes men are more honest that way."

She left him staring dumbly upward as the cariole climbed the sky once more.

When Cassiana — no longer friendly, but reserved and rigid — had brought the news that Matt had commanded her to stay, Beth had disbelieved — had shouted her hysterical disbelief and terror until Cassiana turned and walked out, locking the door behind her. She did not return for three days. Beth saw no one but an old lady who brought her meals and was, or pretended to be, deaf. In that time, Beth lived through a million emotions; but at the end of three days, when Cassiana came back, she looked at Beth with approval.

"I left you alone," she explained briefly, "to see how you reacted to fear and confinement. If you could not endure it, I could have done nothing for you. But I see you are quite calm."

Beth bit her lip, looking down at the smaller woman. "I was angry,"

she admitted. "I didn't think it was necessary to treat me like a child. But somehow I don't think you would have done it without good reason."

Cassiana's smile was a mere flicker. "Yes. I can read your mind a little — not much. I'm afraid you will be a prisoner again, for some time. Do you mind much? We'll try to make it easy for you."

"I'll do whatever you say," Beth promised calmly, and the rhu'ad nodded. "Now, I think you mean that, Bet'."

"I meant it when I said it before!" Beth protested.

"Your brain, and your reason, said it. But a pregnant woman's reasoning faculties aren't always reliable. I had to be certain that your emotions would back up your reason in the event of a shock. Believe me, you'll get some shocks."

But so far there had been none, although Cassiana had not exaggerated in the slightest when she said Beth would be a prisoner. The Terran woman was confined closely in two rooms on the ground floor — a level rarely used in a Centaurian house — and saw no one but Cassiana, Nethle and a servant or two. The rooms were spacious — even luxurious — and the air was filtered by some process which — while it did not diminish the distinctive smell — was somehow less sickening, and easier to breathe. "This air is just as dangerous, chemically, as that outdoors," Cassiana cautioned her. "Don't think that this, alone, makes you safe. But it may make you a little more comfortable. Don't go outside these rooms."

But she kept her promise to make imprisonment easy for Beth. Nethle, too, had recovered from her hysterical attack, and was punctiliously cordial. Beth had access to Cassiana's library — one of the finest tape collections on the planet — although, from a little judicious searching — Beth decided that Cassiana had removed tapes on some subjects she thought the Terran woman should not study too closely — and when Cassiana learned that Beth knew the rather rare art of three-dimensional painting, she asked her guest to teach her. They made several large figures, working together. Cassiana had a quick, artistic sensitivity which delighted Beth, and she swiftly mastered the complicated technique. The shared effort taught them a good deal about each other.

But there was much inconvenience which Cassiana's kindness could not mitigate. With each advancing day, Beth's discomfort became more acute. There was pain, and sickness, and a terrible feeling of breathlessness — for hours she would lie fighting for every breath. Cassiana told her that her system, in the hormone allergy, had lost the ability, in part, to absorb oxygen from the bloodstream. She broke out in violent rashes which never lasted more than a few hours, but recurred every few days. The ordinary annoyances of early pregnancy were there, too, magnified a hundred times.

And during the electric storms, there was a strange reaction, a taut pain as if her body were a conductor for the electricity itself. She wondered if this pain were psychosomatic or genuinely symptomatic, but she never knew.

For some reason, the sickness receded when Cassiana was in the room, and as the days slid past, Cassiana was with her almost constantly, once or twice even sleeping in the same room, on a cot pushed close to Beth's. Unexpectedly, one day, Beth asked her, "Why do I always feel better when you are in the room?"

Cassiana did not answer for a minute. All the morning, they had been working on a three-dimensional painting. The floor was scattered with eye-pieces and pigments, and Cassiana picked up an eyepiece and scanned a figure in the foreground before she even turned around to Beth. Then she disengaged her painting cone, and began to refill it with pigment.

"I wondered when you would ask me that. A telepath's mind controls her body, to some extent — that's a very rough way of putting it, but you don't know enough about psychokinetics to know the difference. Well — when we are working together, as we have been today, your mind is in what we telepaths call vibratory harmony with mine, and you are able to pick up, to a very slight degree, my mental projections. And they, in turn, react on your body."

"You mean you control your body by *thinking*?"

"Everybody does that." Cassiana smiled faintly. "Yes, I know what you mean. I can, for instance, control reflexes which are involuntary in — in normal people. Just as easily as you would flex or relax a muscle in your arm, I can control my heartbeat, blood pressure, uterine contractions —" she stopped abruptly, then finished, "and I can control gross reflexes, such as vomiting, in others — if they come within the kinetic field." She put down the spinning cone. "Look at me, and I'll show you what I mean."

Beth obeyed. After a moment, Cassiana's gilt hair began to darken. It grew darker, darker, till the shining strands were the color of clear honey. Cassiana's cheeks seemed to lose their pearly luster, to turn pinker. Beth blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Are you controlling my mind so I think your skin and hair are changing color?" she asked suspiciously.

"You overestimate my powers! No, but I concentrated all the latent pigment in my skin into my hair. We rhu'ad can look almost as we choose, within certain limits — I couldn't, for instance, make my hair as dark as yours. There simply isn't enough melanin in my pigment. Even this much color wouldn't last, unless I wanted to alter my adrenalin balance permanently. I could do that, too, but it wouldn't be sensible. My hair and skin will change back to rhu'ad during the day — we keep our distinctive coloring, because it's a protection against being harmed or injured accidentally.

We are important to Megaera —" abruptly she stopped again, and a mask of reticence slid down on her face. She re-engaged the spinning-cone and began to weave a surface pattern in the frame.

Beth persisted. "Can you control my body too?"

"A little," said Cassiana shortly. "Why do you think I spend so much time with you?"

Snubbed, Beth took up her spinning-cone and began to weave depth into Cassiana's surface figure. After a minute, Cassiana relented and smiled. "Oh, yes, I enjoy your company too — I did not at first, but I do now."

Beth laughed, a little shamefacedly. She had begun to like Cassiana very much — once she had grown accustomed to Cassiana's habit of answering what Beth was thinking, instead of what she had said.

Weeks slid into months. Beth had now lost all desire to go out of doors, although she dutifully took what slight exercise Cassiana required of her. The rhu'ad now remained with her almost continually. Although Beth was far too ill to study Cassiana, it finally became apparent even to her that Cassiana herself was far from well. The change in the rhu'ad was not marked; a tenseness in her movements, a pallor — Beth could not guess the nature of her ailment. But in spite of this, Cassiana watched over Beth with careful kindness. Had she been Cassiana's own child, Beth thought, the rhu'ad could not have cared for her more solicitously.

Beth did not know that she was so dangerously ill as to shock Cassiana out of her reserve. She could not walk more than a step or two without nausea and a shooting, convulsive pain. The nights were a horror. She knew faintly that they had given her oxygen several times, and even this had left her half asphyxiated. And although it was now past the time when her child should have quickened, she had felt no stir of life.

Half the time she was dizzy, as if drugged. In her rare moments of lucidity, it disturbed her that Cassiana should spend her strength in tending her. But when she tried to voice this, Cassiana returned only a terse, hostile, "You think of yourself and I will take care of myself, and you too."

But once, when Cassiana thought Beth asleep, Beth heard her mutter aloud, "It's too slow! I can't wait much longer — I'm afraid!"

No news from the Terran sector penetrated her seclusion. She missed Matt, and wondered how he had managed to conceal her long absence. But she did not spend much time wondering; life, for her, had been stripped bare of everything except the fight for survival in each successive day. She had slipped so far down into this vegetable existence that she actually shuddered when Cassiana asked her one morning, "Do you feel well enough to go out of doors?" She dressed herself obediently, but roused a little when

Cassiana held a heavy bandage toward her. There was compassion in her eyes.

"I must blindfold you. No one may know where the kail' rhu'ad is. It is too holy."

Beth frowned pettishly. She felt horribly ill, and Cassiana's mystical tone filled her with disbelieving disgust. Cassiana saw, and her voice softened.

She said persuasively, "You must do this, Bet'. I promise I will explain everything some day."

"But why blindfold me? Won't you trust me not to tell, if it's secret?"

"I might trust you and I might not," Cassiana returned coldly. "But there are 10,000 rhu'ad on Megaera, and I am doing this on my single responsibility." Then suddenly her hands clenched so tightly on Beth's that the Terran woman almost cried out with pain, and she said harshly, "I can die too, you know! The Terran women who have died here, don't you think anyone ever tried —" her voice trailed off, indistinct, and suddenly she began to cry softly.

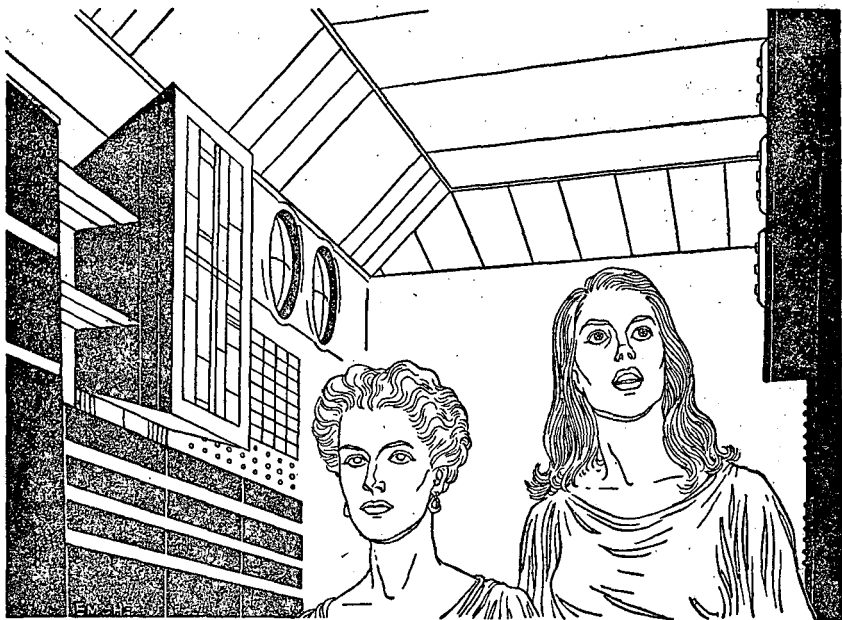
It was the first time since Beth had known her that the rhu'ad had betrayed any kind of emotion. Cassiana sobbed, "Don't fight me, Bet', don't! Both our lives may depend on your personal feelings about me in the next few days — I can't reach you when you're hating me! Try not to hate me so much —"

"I don't hate you, Cassiana," Beth breathed, shocked, and she drew the Centaurian girl close and held her, almost protectingly, until the stormy weeping quieted and Cassiana had herself under control again.

The rhu'ad freed herself from Beth's arms, gently, her voice reserved again. "You had better calm yourself," she said briefly, and handed Beth the scarf. "Tie this over your eyes. I'll trust you to do it securely."

Sometimes Beth tried to remember in detail what happened after Cassiana removed the blindfold, and she found herself in a vast, vaulted room of unbelievable beauty. The opalescent dome admitted a filtered, frosty glimmer of pallid light. The walls, washed in some light pigment which both absorbed and reflected colors too vague to be identified, drifted with hazy shadows. Beth was oblivious to the emotional appeal of the place — she was too alien for that — but the place was unmistakably a temple, and Beth began to be afraid. She had heard about some of the extra-terrestrial religions, and she had always suspected that the rhu'ad filled some religious function. But the beauty of the place touched even her, and gradually she became conscious of a low vibration, almost sound, pervading the entire building.

Cassiana whispered, "That's a telepathic damper. It cuts out the external vibrations and allows the augmentation of others."



The vibration had a soothing effect. Beth sat quietly, waiting, and Cassiana was altogether silent, her eyes closed, her lips moving as if she prayed, but Beth realized afterward that she was simply conversing telepathically with some unseen person. Later, she arose and led Beth through a door which she carefully closed and fastened behind them.

This inner chamber was smaller, and was furnished only with a few immense machines — Beth assumed they were machines, for they were enclosed anonymously in metallic casings, and dials and controls and levers projected chastely from a covering of gray paint — and a few small couches, arranged in pairs. Here three rhu'ad were waiting — slight patrician women who ignored Beth entirely and only glanced at Cassiana.

Cassiana told Beth to lie down on one of the couches, and, leaving her there, went to the other rhu'ad. They stood, their hands laced together, for minutes. Beth, by now habituated to Cassiana's moods, could guess that her friend was disturbed, even defiant. The others seemed equally disturbed; they shook their heads and made gestures that looked angry, but finally Cassiana's fair face looked triumphant and she came back to Beth.

"They are going to let me do what I planned. No, lie still —" she instructed, and to Beth's surprise, Cassiana lay down on the other couch of the pair. This one was located immediately beneath one of the big machines;

the control panel was located in such a way that Cassiana could reach up and manipulate the dials and levers. This she proceeded to do, assuring herself that all were within easy reach; then reached across and touched Beth's pulse lightly. She frowned.

"Too fast — you're excited, or frightened. Here, hold my hand for a minute." Obediently Beth closed her hand around the one Cassiana extended. She forced back her questions, but Cassiana seemed to sense them. "Ssssh. Don't talk, Beth. Here, where the vibrations are dampened, I can control your involuntary reactions too." And, after a few minutes, the Terran woman actually felt her heartbeat slowing to normal, and knew that her breathing was quiet and natural again.

Cassiana took her hand away, reached upward, and began to adjust a dial, her delicate fingers feeling for a careful calibration. "Just lie quietly," she warned Beth, but Beth felt not the slightest desire to move. Warmth and well-being held her lapped in comfort. It was not a perceptible thing, but an intangible vibration, almost but not quite sensible to her nerves. For the first time in months, she was wholly free of discomfort.

Cassiana was fussing with the dials, touching one control, discarding another, playing the vibration now upward until it was almost visible, now downward until it disappeared into sound. Beth began to feel a little dizzy. Her senses seemed augmented, she was so wholly conscious of every nerve and muscle in her body that she could *feel* Cassiana's presence, a few feet away, through the nerves of her skin. The particular sensation identified Cassiana as completely as her voice. Beth even felt it — an odd little coldness — when one of the other rhu'ad approached the couch . . . and when she moved away again.

I suppose, she thought, this is what it feels like to be telepathic. And Cassiana's thoughts seemed to penetrate her brain like so many tiny needles: *Yes, almost like that. Actually, it's just the electrical vibration of your body being put into phase with mine. That's a kind of short-term telepathy. Each individual has his own personal wave-length. We're tuned in to each other now. We used to have to do this telepathically, and it was a horrible ordeal. Now we use the dampers, and it's easy.*

Beth seemed to float somewhere, weightless, above her body. A rhu'ad had walked through the edge of the vibratory field; Beth felt the shock of their out-of-phase bodies, as a painful electric jolt which gradually lessened as they adjusted into the vibration. Then she smelled a sharp-sweet smell, and with her augmented consciousness knew it was a smell of anesthetic — *what were they going to do?* In a spasm of panic she began to struggle; felt steady hands quieting her, heard strange voices —

Her body exploded in a million fragments of light.

The room, the machines and the rhu'ad were gone. Beth was lying on a low, wide shelf, built into the wall of a barren cubicle. She felt sick and breathless, and tried to sit up, but pain shot through her body and she lay still, blinking back tears of agony. She lay gasping, feeling the weight of her child holding her like a vise of iron.

As details came back to her clearing sight, she made out a second shelf across the room. What she had at first taken for a heap of padding was the body of a woman — it was Cassiana — sprawled face downward in an attitude of complete exhaustion. As Beth looked, the rhu'ad turned over and opened her eyes; they looked immense and bloodshot in the whiteness of her face. She whispered hoarsely, "How — do you — feel?"

"A little sick —"

"So do I." Cassiana struggled upright, got to her feet, and walked, with heavy deliberation, toward Beth. As she approached, Beth felt a sort of echo of the soothing vibration, and the pain slackened somewhat. Cassiana sat down on the edge of the shelf, and said quietly, "We are not out of danger. There is still to be —" she paused, seeking a word, and finally used the Galactic standard term, "still to be *allergic reaction*. We have to stay close together — in same kinetic field — days till the reaction is desensitized, and our body develop tolerance to the grafted —" she stopped and said sharply in Centaurian, "I have told you you must not ask me questions! You want your baby to live, don't you? Then just do as I say! I — I am sorry, Bet' — I do not mean to be angry, I do not feel very well either."

Beth knew already that Cassiana never exaggerated, but even knowing this she had not expected the violence of the next few hours. After they reached the Archonate, the world seemed to dissolve around her in a burning fever, a nausea and pain that made her previous illness seem like comfort by comparison. Cassiana, deathly pale, her hands as hot as Beth's own, did not leave her for an instant. They seemed unable to remain apart for an instant. When they were very close together, Beth felt a brief echo of the miasmatic vibration which had eased her in the room of the machines; but at best this was faint, and when Cassiana drew away from her, by even a few feet, a vague, all-over trembling began in every nerve of her body, and the spasms of sickness were aggravated unbearably. The critical distance seemed about twelve feet; at that distance, the pain was almost intolerable. For hours, Beth was too miserable to notice, but it finally dawned on her that Cassiana was actually sharing this same torture. She clung to Beth in a kind of dread. Had they been less ill, Beth thought, they might have found it funny. It was a little like having a Siamese twin. But it was not funny at all. It was a grim business, urgent as survival.

They slept that night on the narrow cots pushed close together. Half a dozen times in her fitful sleep Beth woke to find Cassiana's hand nestled into hers, or the rhu'ad girl's arm flung over her shoulder. Once, in a moment of intimacy, she asked, "Do all women suffer like this — here?"

Cassiana sat up, and pushed back her long pale hair. Her smile was wry and the drawn face, in the flicker of lurid lightning that leaped and danced through the shutters, looked bitter and almost old. "No, or I fear there would be few children. Although, I'm told, when Megaera was first colonized, it was pretty bad. More than half the — the normal women, died. But we found out that sometimes a normal woman could go through a pregnancy, if she was kept close to a rhu'ad constantly. I mean *constantly*. Almost from the minute of conception, she had to stay close to the rhu'ad who was helping her. It was confining for both of them. If they didn't like each other to start with —" suddenly, softly, Cassiana chuckled. "You can imagine, the way you used to feel about me!"

"Oh, Cassiana, *dear* —" Beth begged.

Cassiana went on laughing. "When they didn't hate us, they worshipped us, and that was worse. But now — well, a woman will have a little discomfort — inconvenience — you saw Nethle. But you — if I had not taken you to the kail' rhu'ad when I did, you would have died very soon. As it was I delayed almost too long, but I had to wait, because my child was not —"

"Cassiana," Beth asked her in sudden understanding, "are you going to have a baby too?"

"Of course," Cassiana said impatiently. "How could I help you if I wasn't?"

"You said, rhu'ad don't —"

"They don't usually, it's a waste of time," said Cassiana unguardedly. "Married rhu'ad are not allowed to go through a pregnancy, for now, during all the six cycles of my pregnancy and two more while I recover, no woman in our family group can have a child —" suddenly her anger came back and closed down like a black cloud between their brief intimacy. "Why do you torment me with questions?" she flung furiously at Beth. "You know I mustn't answer them! Just let me alone, let me alone, let me alone!"

She threw up her arm over her eyes, turned on her side and lay without speaking, her back to Beth; but the other, sinking into a restless doze, heard through her light sleep the sound of stifled crying. . . .

Beth thought it was the next day — she had lost consciousness of time — when she started out of sleep with the vague, all-over pain that told her Cassiana was not close to her. Voices filtered through a closed door; Cas-

siana's voice, muted and protesting, and Wilidh's high childish treble.

"... but to suffer so, Cassiana, and for *her*! Why?"

"Perhaps because I was tired of being a freak!"

"Freak?" Wilidh cried, incredulous. "Is that what you call it?"

"Wilidh, you're only a child," Cassiana's voice sounded inexpressibly tender. "If you were what I am, you would know just how much we hate it. Wilidh — since I was younger than you, I have had the burden of four families on my head. In all my life, am I not to do one thing, just one, because I myself wished for it? You have had children of your own. Can't you try to understand me?"

"You have Arli —" Wilidh muttered, sulky.

"She isn't mine — not as Lassa and the twins are yours. Do you know what it's like to carry a child — to watch it die —" Cassiana's voice broke. The voices sank, were indistinct — then there was a sudden sound like a slap, and Cassiana cried out furiously, "Wilidh, tell me what Nethle has done! I'm not *asking* you, I am ordering you to tell —"

Beth heard Wilidh stammering something — then there was a stifled scream, a wailing sound, and Cassiana, her face drained of color, pushed the door and came with groping steps to Beth's side. "Bet' — wake up!"

"I'm awake — what's happened, Cassiana?"

"Nethle — *false friend, false sister* —" Cassiana's voice failed her. Her mouth moved, but no words came. She looked ghastly, sick and worn, and she had to support herself with one hand against the frame of Beth's cot. "Listen — there are — Terrans here, looking for you. They are looking for you — days now — your husband could not lie well enough, and Nethle told —" she clutched at Beth's hand. "You *cannot* leave here now. We might both die —" she stopped, her face gone impassive. There was a knock on the door.

Beth lay quiet, her eyes burning, as the door swung wide. Cassiana, a stony, statue-still figure of offended tradition, stared coldly at the two intruders who crossed the threshold. In 600 years no man had penetrated these apartments. The Terrans stood ill at ease, knowing they violated every tradition, law, custom of the planet.

"Matt!" Beth whispered, not believing.

In two strides he was beside her, but she drew away from his arms. "Matt, you promised!" she said unsteadily.

"Honey, honey —" Matt moaned. "What have they *done* to you here?" He looked down, tormented, at her thinner cheeks, and touched her forehead with disbelieving dismay. "Good God, Dr. Bonner, she's burning with fever!" He straightened and whirled on the other. "Let's get her out of here, and talk afterward. She belongs in a hospital!"

The doctor thrust the protesting Cassiana unceremoniously aside. "I'll deal with you later, young woman," he said between his teeth. He bent professionally over Beth; after a moment he turned on Cassiana again. "If this girl dies," he said slowly, "I will hold you personally responsible for denying her competent medical attention. I happen to know she hasn't been near any practitioner on the planet. If she dies, I will haul you into court if I have to take it to Galactic Center on Rigel!"

Beth pushed Matt's hand away. "Please —" she begged. "You don't realize — Cassiana's been good to me, she's tried to —" she sat up, clutching her night robe — one of Nethle's, a little too small for her — about her bare shoulders. "If it hadn't been for her —"

"Then why all this secrecy?" the doctor asked curtly. He thrust a message capsule into Cassiana's hands. "Here. This will settle it." Like a sleep-walker, Cassiana opened it, drew out the slip of flexible plastic, stared, shrugged and tossed it to Beth. Incredulous, Beth Ferguson read the legal words. Under the nominal law of the Terran Empire, they could be enforced. But this — to the wife of the Chief Archon of Megaera — she opened her mouth in silent indignation.

Matt said quietly, "Get dressed, Betty. I'm taking you to the hospital. No —" he checked her protest, "don't say a word. You aren't capable of making decisions for yourself. If Cassiana meant you any good, there wouldn't be all this business of hiding you."

Cassiana caught Beth's free hand tight. She looked desperate — trapped. "Leave her with me for three days," she made a final appeal. "She'll die if you take her away now!"

Dr. Bonner said tersely "If you can give me a full explanation of that statement, I'll consider it. I'm a medical man. I think I'm a reasonable man." Cassiana only shook her head silently. Beth blinked hard, almost crying. "Cassiana! Can't you *tell* them —"

"Leave her with me for three days — and I'll try to get permission to tell you —" Cassiana begged helplessly. Before her despairing eyes, Matt lowered his own. "Look, Doc, we could be making a big mistake —"

"We're only delaying," the doctor said tersely. "Come on, Mrs. Ferguson, get dressed. We're taking you to the Medical HQ. If we find that this — this delay hasn't really hurt you any —" he turned and glared at Cassiana, "then maybe we'll do some apologizing. But unless you can explain —"

Cassiana said bitterly "I am sorry, Bet'. If I were to tell now, without permission, I would not live till sunset. And neither would anyone who heard what I said."

"Are you threatening us?" Matt asked ominously.

"Not at all. Only stating a fact." Cassiana's eyes held cold contempt.

Beth was sobbing helplessly. Dr. Bonner rasped, "Pull yourself together! You'll go, or be carried. You're a sick girl, Mrs. Ferguson, and you'll do as you're told."

Cassiana said softly, "Leave her alone with me for just a few minutes; at least, while I get her dressed —"

Matt started to leave the room, but the doctor put a hand on his shoulder. "Stay with your wife. Or I will."

"Never mind," said Beth wearily, and began to get out of bed. Cassiana hovered near her, not speaking, her face sick with despair, while the Earth-woman managed to dress herself after a fashion. But as Beth, still protesting helplessly, leaned on Matt, Cassiana suddenly found her voice.

"You will do justice to remember," she said, very low, "that I have warn' you. When there come thing which you do not understand, remember. Bet' —" she looked up imploringly, then without warning she broke down and collapsed, a limp rag, on the tumbled bed. The servant women, spitting Centaurian curses, hastened to her. Beth struggled to free Matt's hands, but the two men carried her from the room.

It was like dying. It was like being physically pulled into pieces. Beth clawed and fought, knowing in some subconscious, instinctive way that she was fighting for her life, feeling strength drain out of her, second by second. The world dissolved in red fog, and she slumped down fainting in her husband's arms.

Time and delirium passed over her head. The white sterile smells of the Medical HQ surrounded her, and the screens around her bed bounded her sight except when Matt or a puzzled doctor bent over her. She was drugged, but through the sedatives there was pain and a fearful sickness and she cried and begged Matt incoherently, "Cassiana — I had to be near her, can't you understand —" and Matt only patted her hand and whispered gentle words. She dived down deep into delirium again, feeling her body burning, while faces, familiar and strange, multiplied around her, and once she heard Matt shouting in a voice that cracked like a boy's, "Damn it, she's worse than she was when we found her, *do* something, can't any of you *do* anything?"

Beth knew she was dying, and the idea seemed pleasant. Then quite suddenly, she came up to the surface of her fogged dreams to see the pallid stern face of a rhu'ad above her.

Beth's eyes and brain cleared simultaneously. The room was otherwise empty. Pinkish sunlight and a cool, pungent breeze filled the white spaces, and the rhu'ad's face was colorless and alien but full of reserved friendliness. Not only the room but the whole building seemed oddly silent; no distant voices, no hurrying footsteps, nothing but the distant hum of skycabs out-

side the windows, and the faint rustle of the ventilators. Beth felt a sort of drowsy, lazy comfort. She smiled, and said without surprise, "Cassiana sent you."

The rhu'ad murmured, "Yes. She nearly died too, you know. Your Terrans are —" she used a word which did not appear in Megaerean dictionaries — but she did not forget you. I have done a fearful thing, so you must promise not to tell anyone that I've been here. I brought a damper into the building and hypnotized all the nurses on this floor. I've got to leave before they wake up. But you will get well now."

Beth pleaded, "Why is this secrecy so necessary? Why can't you just tell them what you've done? I know they didn't think I'd live, the fact that I feel better should be enough proof!"

"They would try to make me tell them, and then they would not believe me. After they see your baby, they will believe it. Then we will tell them."

Beth asked her, "Who are you?"

The rhu'ad smiled faintly and mentioned the name of one of the most important men on Megaera. Her eyes twinkled at Beth's astonishment. "They sent me rather than an unknown — in the event I *am* found here, your Terrans might hesitate to cause an international incident. But just the same I don't intend to let them see me."

"But what was the matter with me?"

"You developed an allergy to the baby. Alien tissue — blood types that didn't mix — but you'll be all right now. I haven't time to explain it," the rhu'ad finished impatiently and turned, without another word, and hurried out of the room.

Beth felt free and light, her body in comfort, without a trace of sickness or pain. She lay back on her pillows, smiling, feeling the faint stir and quickening of the child within her, then adjusted the smile to the proper angle as a nurse — one of Dr. Bonner's hard-faced old Darkovan assistants — tipped in, her face sheepish, and peered round the corner of the screen. Beth had to force back a spontaneous laugh at the change which came over the old lady's face as she gasped, "Oh — Mrs. Ferguson — you — you *do* look better this morning, don't you? I — I — I think Dr. Bonner had better have a look at you —" and she turned and actually ran out of the cubicle.

"But what did they *do* to you? Surely you must know what they did to you," Dr. Bonner protested tiredly for the hundredth time. "Just tell me what you remember. Even if it doesn't make sense to you."

Beth felt sorry for the old man's puzzlement. It couldn't be pleasant for him, to admit he'd failed. She said gently, "I've told you everything." She paused, trying to put it into words he could accept; she had tried to tell

him about the manner in which Cassiana's physical presence had soothed her, but he had shrugged it off angrily as delirium.

"This place where they took you. Where was it?"

"I don't know. Cassiana blindfolded me." She paused again. From prolonged mental contact with Cassiana, she had come from the kail' rhu'ad with a subdued sense of having taken part in a religious ritual, but it meant nothing to her as religion, and she could only give incoherent scraps of her impressions. "A big domed room — and a room full of machines —" at his request, she described the machines in as much detail as she could remember, but he shook his head. Trying to help, she ventured, "Cassiana called one of them a telepathic damper —"

"Are you *sure*? Those things are made on Darkover, and their export is generally discouraged — even the Darkovans won't talk about them very much. The other thing could have been a Howell C-5 Electropsychometer. It must have been a special hopped-up model, though, if it could put your cell waves into phase with a telepath's!" His eyes were thoughtful. "I wonder what they did that for? It must have hurt like hell!"

"Oh, no!" Beth tried to explain just how it had felt, but he only shrugged and looked dissatisfied again. "When I examined you," he told her, and glanced sidewise at Matt, "I found an incision, about four inches long, in the upper right groin. It was almost healed over, and they'd pulled it together with a cosmetic lacquer — even under a magnifying glass, it was hard to see."

Beth said, struggling for a dim memory, "Just as I was going under the anesthetic, one of the rhu'ad said something. It must have been a technical term, because I didn't understand it. *Aghmara kedulhi varrha*. Does that mean anything to you, Dr. Bonner?"

The man's white head moved slightly. "The words mean, *placenta graft*. Placenta graft," he repeated, slowly. "Are you absolutely certain those were the words?"

"Positive."

"But that doesn't make sense, Mrs. Ferguson. Even a partial detachment of the human placenta would have caused miscarriage."

"I definitely haven't miscarried!" Beth laughed, patting her swollen body.

The old man smiled with her. "Thank God for that!" he said sincerely. But his voice was troubled. "I wish I was sure of those words."

Beth hesitated, "Maybe it was — *Aghmarda kedulhiarra va*?"

Bonner shook his head, almost smiling. "*Kedulhi* — placenta — is bad enough," he said. "*Kedulhiarra* — who ever heard of grafting a baby? No, you must have had it right the first time, I guess. Maybe they grafted,

subcutaneously, some kind of placental tissue from a Centaurian. That would even explain the allergy. Possibly Mrs. Jeth-san acted as the donor?"

"Then why did she have the allergy too?" Beth asked. Dr. Bonner's heavy shoulders lifted and dropped. "God knows. All I can say is that you're a lucky, lucky girl, Mrs. Ferguson." He looked at her in unconcealed wonder, then turned to Matt. "You might as well take your wife home, Legate. She's perfectly all right. I've never seen a Terran woman look so healthy on Megaera. But stay close to home," he advised her. "I'll come over and have a look at you now and then. There must be some reason why the Centaurians go into seclusion. We'll try it with you — no sense in taking chances."

But Beth's sickness did not return. Contentedly secluded in the Residence, as snugly celled as a bee in her hive, she made tranquil preparations for the birth of her child. Nature has a sort of anesthesia for the pregnant woman; it smoothed Beth's faint disquiet about Cassiana. Matt was tender with her, refusing to discuss his work, but Beth detected lines of strain in his face and voice, and after a month of this she asked him point-blank, "Is something wrong, Matt?"

Matt hesitated — then exploded. "Everything's gone wrong! Your friend Cassiana has really messed us up properly with Rai Jeth-san! I'd counted on his cooperation, but now —" he gave a despondent shrug. "He just says, in that damned effeminate voice of his," Matt's husky baritone rose to a thin mocking echo of the Archon's accent, "peaceful settlement is what we want. Terran colonists with their wives and children we will accept, but on Megaera we will not accept floods of unmarried and unattached personnel to disturb the balance of our civilization." Matt made a furious gesture. "He knows Terrans can't bring their women here! The hell with this place, Betty — space station and all! They can blow the planet into the Milky Way, for all I care! As soon as Junior is born, and you're clear for space, I'm going to throw this job right in the Empire's face! I'll take a secretaryship somewhere — we'll probably have to go out on the fringe of the Galaxy — but at least I've got you!" He bent down to kiss his wife. "It serves me right for bringing you here in the first place!"

Beth hugged him, but she said in a distressed tone, "Matt, Cassiana saved my life! I simply can't believe that she'd turn the Archon against you. We don't deserve what Cassiana did for me — the Empire's been treating Megaera like a piece of lost-and-found property!"

Matt laughed, guilty. "Are you going in for politics?"

Beth said hotly, "You have authority to make recommendations, don't you? Why not, once, just once, do what's fair, instead of what the diplomatic manual recommends? You *know* that if you resign now, Terra will close out

the Legation here, and put Megaera under martial law as a slave state! I know, the official term is protectorate satellite, but it means the same thing! Why don't you make a formal recommendation that Megaera be given dominion status, as an independent, affiliated government?"

Matt began, "To achieve that distinction, a planet has to make some important contribution to Galactic Civilization —"

"Oh, comet dust!" Beth snapped. "The fact of their survival proves that their science is ahead of ours!"

Matt said dubiously, "The Empire might agree to an independent buffer state in this end of the Galaxy. But they've been hostile to the Empire —"

"They sent a petition to Terra, 600 years ago," Beth said quietly. "Their women died by thousands while the petition was being pigeonholed. I think they'd die all over again before they asked anything of Terra. It's Terra's turn to offer something. The Empire owes them something! Independence and affiliation —"

"Cassiana's certainly got *you* sold on Megaeran politics," Matt said sourly.

"Politics be damned!" Beth said with such heat that her husband stared. "Can't you *see* what it means, idiot — what Cassiana did? It proves that Terran women *can* come here in safety! It means that we *can* send colonists here for peaceful settlement! Can't you see, you half-wit, that's the opening Rai Jeth-san was leaving for you? Cassiana's proved a concession on their side — it's up to Terra to make the next move!"

Matt stared at her in blank surprise.

"I hadn't thought of it that way. But, honey, I believe you're right! I'll put through the recommendation, anyway. The planet's almost a dead loss now, things couldn't be worse. We've nothing to lose — and we might gain a good deal."

Beth's baby was born at the Residence — the Medical HQ did not have maternity ward facilities, and Dr. Bonner thought Beth would be more comfortable at home — on the first day of the brief Megaeran winter. She came, alert and awake, out of a brief induced sleep, and asked the usual questions.

"It's a girl." Dr. Bonner's lined old face looked tired and almost angry. "A little over three pounds, in this gravity. Try to rest, Mrs. Ferguson."

"But is she — is she all right?" Beth caught weakly at his hand. "Please tell me — please, please let me see her —"

"She's — she's —" the old doctor stumbled over a word, and Beth saw him blink hard. "She's — we're giving her oxygen. She's perfectly all right, it's just a precaution. Go to sleep, like a good girl. You can see her when you wake up." Abruptly, he turned his back and walked away.

Beth struggled against the lassitude that forced her head back. "Dr. Bonner — please —" she called after him weakly. The nurse bent over and there was the sharp prick of a needle in her arm. "Go to sleep, now, Mrs. Ferguson. Your baby's all right. Can't you hear her squalling?"

Beth sobbed, "What's the matter with him? *Is there something wrong with my baby?*" The nurse could not hold her back. Before her fierce maternity the old woman hesitated, then turned and crossed the room. "All right, I guess one look won't hurt you. You'll sleep better if you've seen her." She picked up something and came back to the bed. Beth reached out hungrily, and after a minute, smiling faintly, the Darkovan woman put the baby down on the bed beside Beth.

"Here. You can hold her for a minute. The men don't understand, do they?"

Beth smiled happily, folding back the square of blanket that lay lapped over the small face. Then her mouth fell open and she uttered a sharp cry.

"This isn't my baby! It's not — she isn't, you don't —" her eyes blurred with panicky tears. Rebelliously, scared, she looked down in terror at the baby she held.

The infant was not red or wrinkled. The smooth soft new skin was white — a shining, lustrous, *pearly* white. The tight-screwed eyes were a slaty silver, and a pallid, gilt-colored down already curled faintly on the little round head.

Perfect. Healthy. But — a rhu'ad.

The nurse dived for the baby as Beth fainted.

It was nearly a month before Beth was strong enough to get up during the day. Shock had played vicious havoc to her nerves, and she was very ill indeed. Her mind acquiesced, and she loved her small perfect daughter, but the unconscious conflict forced itself inward, and took revenge on every nerve of her body. The experience had left a hidden wound, too raw to touch. She sheltered herself behind her weakness.

The baby — over Matt's protest, Beth had insisted on calling the child Cassy — was more than a month old when one afternoon her Centaurian servant came into her room and announced, "The Archon's wife has come to visit you, Mrs. Legate Furr-ga-soon."

Beth had forced the memory so deep that she only thought that Nethle or Wilidh had come to pay a formal call. She sighed and stood up, sliding her bare feet into scuffs, and padding across to her dressing panel. She twisted buttons, playing out lengths of billowing nylene to cover her short indoor chemise, and slid her head into the brusher which automatically attended to her short hair. "I'll go up. Take Cassy down to the nursery, will you?"

The Centaurian girl murmured, "She has her baby — with her."

Beth stared in stupefaction. No wonder the servant girl had seemed thunderstruck. A baby outside its own home, on Megæra?

"Bring her down here, then —" she directed. But that did not dull her surprise when a familiar, lightly moving form shrouded in pale robes, ghosted into the room.

"Cassiana!" she said tremulously.

The rhu'ad smiled at her affectionately as they clasped hands. Then suddenly Beth threw her arms around Cassiana and broke down in a tempest of stormy crying.

"Don't, don't —" Cassiana pleaded, but it was useless. All the suppressed fear and shock had broken loose at once, and Cassiana held her, awkwardly, as if unused to this kind of emotion, trying to comfort, finally bursting into tears herself. When she could speak again steadily, she said, "Can you believe me, Beth, if I say I know how you are feeling? Look, you must try to pull yourself together, I have promised I'd explain to you —"

She freed herself gently, and from the servant's arms she took a bundle, carefully shielded in tough, transparent plastic, with double handles for carrying. She opened the package carefully and from the depths of this ingenious cradle she lifted a wrapped baby, held it out and put it into Beth's arms.

"This is my little boy —"

Beth finally raised her eyes to Cassiana, who was standing, fascinated, by Cassy's crib. "He — he — he looks like —" Beth faltered, and Cassiana nodded. "That's right. He is a Terran child. But he's mine. Rather — he's ours." Her earnest eyes rested on the other in something like appeal. "I promised to explain — *Dhe mháiri*, Bet', don't start to cry again. . . ."

"We rhu'ad would probably have been killed, anywhere except on Megæra," Cassiana began, a few minutes later, when they had settled down together on a cushioned divan, the babies snuggled down in pillows between them. "Here, we saved the colony. Originally, I think, we were a cosmic ray mutation. We were part of the normal population then. We hadn't adapted quite so far." She paused. "Do you know what Genetic Drift is? In an isolated population, hereditary characteristics just drift away from normal. I mean — suppose a colony had, to begin with, half blonde people, and half brunette. In a normal society, it would stay distributed like that — about 50-50 per cent. But in one generation, just by chance, it might vary as far as 60-40. In the next generation, it could go back to normal, or — the balance once having been changed — it could keep drifting, and there would be 70 per cent of blondes and only 30 per

cent of brunettes. That's oversimplified, of course, but if that keeps up for eight or ten generations, with natural selection working hard too, you get a distinct racial type. We had two directions of drifting, because we had the normal population, and — we had the rhu'ad. Our normal women were dying — more in every generation. The rhu'ad could have children safely, but somehow, we had to preserve the normal type."

She picked up Cassy and snuggled her close. "Did you name her for me, then?" she asked. "Well — I started to explain. A rhu'ad is human, and perfectly normal, except — they will find it out about Cassy some day — we have, in addition to our other organs, a *third* ovary. And this third ovary is parthenogenetic — self-reproducing. We could have perfectly human, normally sexed children, either male or female, who would breed true to the normal human type. They were even normally susceptible to the poisonous reaction in this air. These normal children were carried, in the normal way, except that a rhu'ad mother was immune to the hormone reaction, and could protect a normal child. Or, a rhu'ad woman could, from the *third* ovary, *at her own will* — we have control over all our reflexes, including conception — have a *rhu'ad*, female child. Any rhu'ad can reproduce, duplicate herself, without male fertilization. I never had a father. No rhu'ad does."

"Is Cassy —"

Cassiana paid no attention to the interruption. "But the mutation is female. While the normal women were dying, and only the rhu'ad could have children — and even these children died when they grew up — we were afraid that in three or four generations we would end with an all-female, parthenogenetic, all-rhu'ad society. No one wanted that. Least of all the rhu'ads themselves." She paused. "We have all the instincts of normal women. I *can* have a child without male fertilization," she looked searchingly at Beth, "but that does not change the fact that I — I love my husband and I want *his* children — like any other woman. Perhaps more — being telepathic. That's an emotional problem, too. We have done our part for Me-gaera, but we — we want to be women. Not sexless freaks!"

She paused, again, then continued, evidently searching for words. "The rhu'ad are almost completely adaptable. We tried implanting rhu'ad gametes — ova — from our normal ovaries, into normal women. It didn't work, so finally they evolved the system we have today. A rhu'ad becomes pregnant in the normal way —" for the first time Beth saw her blush slightly, "and carries her child for two, maybe three months. By that time, the unborn child builds up a *temporary* immunity against the toxins released by the hormone allergy. Then they transfer this two-month embryo into the host mother's womb. The immunity lasts long enough that the baby

can be carried to full term, and birthed. Then, of course, there's no more danger at all, for a male child — or, for a female child, no more danger until she grows up and herself becomes pregnant.

"Another thing: After a woman has her first child like that, she also builds up a very slight immunity to the hormone reaction. For a woman's second child, or third, or more, it is sufficient to transplant a fertilized ovum of six or seven days . . . provided that there is a rhu'ad within immediate call, to stabilize the chemistry in case anything goes wrong. One or more of my families always has a woman who is pregnant, so I must be continuously available."

"Isn't that terribly hard on you?" Beth asked.

"Physically, no. We've done what they do with prize cattle all over the Empire — hyperovulation. At certain days in each cycle, rhu'ads are given particular hormone and vitamin substances, so that we release not one ovum, but somewhere between four and twelve. Usually they can be transferred about a week later, and the operation is almost painless —"

"Then *all* the children in your four — families, are *yours*, and your husband's?"

"Why, no! Children belong to the woman who bears them and gives birth to them — and to the man who loves that woman, and mates with her!" Cassiana laughed. "Oh, I suppose all societies adapt their morals to their needs. To me, it's a little — nasty, for man to have just one wife, and live with her all year. And aren't you terribly lonely, with no other women in your house?"

It was Beth's turn to blush. Then she asked, "But you said those were normal children. Cassy — Cassy is a rhu'ad —"

"Oh yes. I couldn't do with you what I'd have done with a Centaurian. You had no resistance at all, and you were already pregnant. Women *do* become pregnant sometimes, in the ordinary way, on Megaera — we are strict about contraceptive laws, but nothing is entirely reliable — and when they do, they die, unless a rhu'ad will take for them the risk I took for you. I had done it once before, for Clotine, but the baby I had died — well, during those three days while you were shut up alone, I went to the kail' rhu'ad, and put myself under a damper — and became pregnant. By myself."

A thousand tiny hints were suddenly falling into place in Beth's mind. "Then you did graft —"

Cassiana nodded. "That's right. When we went together to the kail' rhu'ad, the dampers put us into phase — so the cellular wave lengths wouldn't vary enough to throw the babies into shock — and just exchanged the babies."

Beth had been expecting this; but even so, Cassiana's casual tone was a shock. "You really —"

"Yes. My little boy is — by heredity alone — your child and the Legate's. But he is mine. He lived because I — being rhu'ad — could carry him in safety, and manage to stabilize his reactions to the hormone allergy with the atmosphere. There was no question of Cassy's safety: a rhu'ad baby, even a rhu'ad embryo, is perfectly adaptable, even to the alien environment of a Terran body. The first few days were so crucial because you and I both developed allergies to the grafted alien tissue; our bodies were fighting the introduction of a foreign kind of substance. But once we mother-hosts began to develop a tolerance, I could stabilize myself, and my little boy, and you — and when you were taken from me too soon, I could send another rhu'ad to complete the stabilization. There was no need to worry about Cassy; she simply adapted to the poisonous condition which would have killed a normal child."

She picked up Cassy and rocked her almost wistfully. "You have a most unusual little daughter, Bet'. A perfect little parasite."

Beth looked down at Cassiana's little boy. Yes, she could trace in his face a faint likeness to the lines of Matt's, and yet — hers? No. Cassy was hers, borne in her body — she wanted to cry again.

Cassiana leaned over and put an arm around her. "Bet'," she said quietly, "I have just come from the Legation HQ, where — with full permission of the Council of Rhu'ad — I have laid before them a complete, scientific account of the affair. I have also been allowed to assure the Terran authorities that when Terran colonists come here to build the Space Station, their women will be safe. We have suggested that colonists be limited to families who have already had children, but we will give assurance that an accidental pregnancy need not be disastrous. In return I received assurance, forwarded from Galactic Center, that Megaera will receive full dominion status as an independent planetary government associated with the Empire. And we are being opened to colonization."

"Oh, how wonderful!" Beth cried impulsively. Then doubt crept into her voice. "But so many of your people hate us —"

The rhu'ad smiled. "Wait until your women come. Unattached men, on Megaera, could only make trouble. Men have so many different basic drives! An Empire man from Terra is nothing like a Centaurian from Megaera, and a Darkovan from Thendara is different from either — take ten men from ten different planets; and you have ten different basic drives — so different that they can only lead to war and ruin. But women — all through the Galaxy, Terran, Darkovan, Samarran, Centaurian, Rigelian — women are all alike, or at least they have a common basic

area. A baby is the passport to the one big sorority of the universe. And admission is free to every woman in the Galaxy. We'll get along."

Beth asked numbly, "And you were convinced enough of that to risk your life for a Terran who — hated you? I'm ashamed, Cassiana."

"It wasn't entirely for you," Cassiana admitted. "You and your husband were Megaera's first and last chance to avoid being a backwater of the Galaxy. I planned this from the minute I first saw you. I — I wasn't your friend, either, at first."

"You — you *couldn't* have known I'd get pregnant —"

Cassiana looked shamed and embarrassed. "Bet'. I — I planned it, just as it happened. I'm a telepath. It was my mental command that made you stop taking your anti shots."

Beth felt a sudden surge of anger so great that she could not look at Cassiana. She had been manipulated like a puppet —

She felt the rhu'ad's thin hand on her wrist. "No. Only a fortuitous accident in the way of destiny. Bet', look at them —" Her free hand touched the two babies, who had fallen asleep, cuddled like two little animals. "They are sister and brother, in more than one way. And perhaps you will have other children. You belong to us, now, Bet'."

"My husband —"

"Men will adapt to anything, if their women accept it," Cassiana told her. "And your daughter is a rhu'ad — who will grow up in a Terran home. There will be others like her. In her turn she will help the daughters of Terran families who come here, until science finds a new way and each woman can bear her own children again — or until Centaurians take their place, moving out into the Galaxy with the rest —"

And Beth knew in her heart that Cassiana was right.

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Gerda

by EVELYN E. SMITH

SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL: she had golden hair and blue eyes like a fairy-tale princess's. In fact, she might even have been a real princess, for she came of a noble Middle-European family so highly placed that there not impossibly was a thread of royal purple mingling with the azure in their veins. But she never spoke of it. When she spoke, it was always about her work.

Currently she was a Biology Major. Her interest in Biology seemed to be quite objective, for, although virtually every male heart at the University — from ancient Professor down to fuzz-faced Freshman — beat as one for her, she spurned their attentions to devote herself to her science.

Not least among her admirers was Peter Loomis, a Junior and a Psychology Major, with a B-minus average. The reason that he did not have an A-plus average, even though he was brilliant at Psychology, was that he kept flunking Mathematics and Physical Training term after term. These subjects were required of all students by the University officials, who operated on the theory that happiness was not good for the young.

But, as far as Peter was concerned, the miseries of Gym and Calculus, although great, were as nothing compared to the pangs of unrequited love. For, in view of the fact that Gerda had already refused to attend the Senior Prom with the Captain of the Football Team, take in a nightclub with the handsomest of the Dramatics teachers, or visit whatever era she chose with the Head of the Physics Department in his Time Machine, it should have seemed presumptuous to him to dare to ask her to go to the Student Union with him for a chocolate malted. But ask her he did.

True worth did not win out over crass comeliness or intellectual attainment. It seldom does in real life. "No, thank you," she said politely, as she had said to the Football Captain, the Dramatics teacher, and the Physicist. "I am too busy with my Biological experiments, which are of a momentous and world-shaking nature."

This unnatural speech should have warned Peter, but the poor fool was blinded by his mad infatuation. All he knew was that her accent was fascinating. She was fascinating. Why couldn't she see the rare qualities in him that he himself was able so easily to discern? How could such a lovely creature be as imperceptive as the Math and Gym teachers, who were, of course, quite unlovely, but who also exerted a powerful influence on his life?

But it was of Gerda he mostly thought — not of them. Obviously there was something wrong with her, he was forced to admit to himself; otherwise she could not have failed to succumb to the battery of male charm — not only his, he conceded modestly — with which she had been bombarded. But using Psychological wiles on her would be useless, for she had also, with equal tact, spurned the whole Psychology Department. Something stronger was needed.

Peter betook himself to the Department of Necromancy, to which he had the entrée since every Psychology Major was required to Minor in that subject. There he found the Head of the Department muttering to himself in Latin as he stirred the contents of a crucible.

"Professor Tenebroso —" Peter began.

"Oh, drat!" the Professor said petulantly. "You've spoiled my incantation. Now I'll have to start all over again. Go away, won't you?"

"I wanted to ask you a question, sir. I need help."

"In my day," the old man snarled, "we worked out our own problems or we were turned into field mice. Well, what do you want?"

Peter told his story. Professor Tenebroso actually appeared to be paying a limited amount of attention, which was the most anyone could expect from him. He interrupted the youth before he had finished. "Obviously she's under a spell!" he snapped, waving his rod petulantly. "Any fool could see that."

"Of course, of course, sir," Peter replied eagerly. "An enchanted princess," he said to himself. "Now, how could I have missed that? . . . But how can I break the spell, sir?" he asked aloud.

Professor Tenebroso was agitating the contents of his crucible again. "Oh, it's one of those elementary things," he said vaguely. "I should think just a kiss would do it."

Peter bounded off, without stopping to thank the Professor or to point out to him that the end of his beard had crept into the crucible. A kiss! What a simple, traditional, and altogether satisfactory way of breaking a spell!

He sped light-footed to the Science Building. There, by good luck, he found Gerda alone in one of the Biology Laboratories meticulously vivisectioning a frog.

"Gerda!" he announced dramatically, "I have come to break the spell that binds you!"

The princess drew back, her eyes indigo with alarm. "No, no! I beg of you, Peter," she protested, trying to fend him off with a pair of forceps. "You do not know what you are planning to do!"

"I am going to take you in my arms, little one," Peter breathed, tenderly wrenching the forceps out of her delicate hand.

"No, Peter," she protested, struggling. "I implore you. . . . I warn you. . . . You will be sorry, I tell you, mad, impetuous youth!"

But she was no match for his superior strength. That term of compulsory Physical Education which he was now repeating for the fifth time, had done its work well, in spite of the teacher's opinion.

"Ha, ha!" Peter laughed contemptuously, as he folded her in his arms and pressed his lips against hers.

There was a flash of lightning, a clap of thunder. The earth trembled. So did Peter, although he had not been entirely unprepared for some such manifestation.

And then Gerda was released from her enchantment.

Even if Peter had not recoiled in horror, he would have found it difficult to continue to clasp her in his arms, for she was now at least twenty times as big as he, and finding the Biology Lab rather a tight fit.

"Sorry, Peter," Gerda apologized, choking slightly on a mouthful of smoke and flame. "I was under a spell all right, and a kiss was needed to release me. However, I wasn't an enchanted princess at all, but an enchanted dragon."

Peter backed away.

"Ah, fickleness, your name is man!" the dragon said. "Just the other day you were pledging me eternal faith. And now, when I really need you, you recoil from me!" She sighed, and the room swirled with clouds of smoke. "I fear it was for my beauty of person you loved me, Peter, and not for my beauty of soul."

On a dragon, the Middle-European accent wasn't nearly as charming.

"I'm awfully sorry," Peter explained, trying to retreat imperceptibly, "but I thought you were going to eat me."

She coughed, and gout of fire flew all over the room. "I am."

"Listen to me for a moment, will you!" Peter shrieked, dodging around a table. "Just a minute, for old times' sake! Remember, we were in Modern European History together!"

"Very well," she conceded. "You have touched the core of sentimentality that lies deep within the heart of every dragon. Because we were classmates, I will listen. But hurry up; I'm hungry!"

Peter took a deep breath. "Actually I want to ask you a question: why do you have to eat *me*? You aren't bound to eat the person who breaks the spell, are you?"

"It's not in the rules; if that's what you mean. But there's no law against it either."

"But you could eat lots of other people instead. There's Professor Quaternion, for instance. . . ."

"Why should . . . ? Hmmm," she mused. "He gave me a *D* in Trig and spoiled my chances of making Phi Bete."

"This University has, as you know, a very large Mathematics Department," he tempted her, "full of stout and juicy instructors. And then there's the Physical Ed Department!"

The dragon licked her lips again. "That Miss Teres," she said. "Making *me* do a double forward somersault!"

"I will hold them in conversation while you sneak up on them from behind!" Peter promised enthusiastically. "It will spare you from having to expend any undue effort. Besides, most people, unaware of the golden heart that beats beneath your saurian exterior, would tend to flee as soon as they caught sight of you."

"*You* don't have to worry, Peter," the dragon said tenderly. "You have convinced me. Why, with a whole University full of overfed pedagogues and succulent, toothsome adolescents, need I devour my only friend? Come, let us away before I forget myself!"

"I think Mathematics first," Peter decided, "as the Gym teachers are apt to be somewhat stringy as a result of excessive exercise."

"I shall do my Master's Thesis," he said happily to himself, "on the Psychology of Dragons. It will be a milestone in the History of Learning."

And hand in hand, they wandered off into the sunset.

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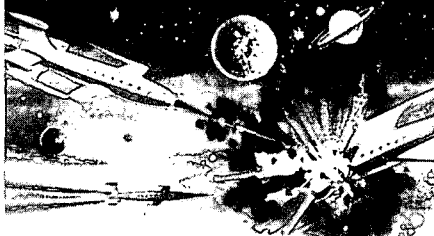
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